

Fiction

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THESE MEN THY FRIENDS
A FAREWELL TO INDIA
IN ARABY ORION

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NIGHT FALLS
ON
SIVA'S HILL

BY

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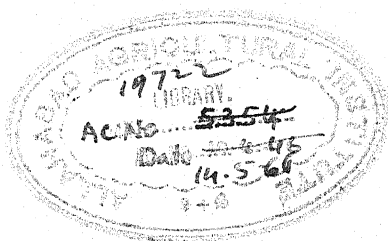
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To

MRS. PERCY LYON

this book in which I have
taken the liberty of using her name

NIGHT FALLS ON SIVA'S HILL



Night Falls on Siva's Hill

CHAPTER I

I

IN 1876, to the Miani Light Horse, stationed at Gangapahar, came a new subaltern, Mr. John Carmichael Lyon. To this famous regiment one cannot say that he added arrogance. For that is not arrogance, which is the conscious excellence of youth and physical perfection bearing itself proudly—a panther walks across a sunlit patch of forest. But he adopted easily the acceptance of its own eminence current in the society he joined; and was recognised as one who even enhanced this eminence.

European India was quiet. There was what has never altogether ceased, the smouldering excitement of rumours of another Mutiny. The last was a recent memory, and a flare up of Sikh fanaticism had been quenched, three years back, with

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all the old horror, cruelty, and little law. There was the imagination that was to stir amid the sleep and dreams of military British India for another thirty years, of Russia moving by the Afghan passes to assault. But this imagination never changed to reality.

Such warfare as there was was wordy and internecine. From time to time Government and the planter community clashed, and bitterly enough. The victory of 1858 had been too complete and terrible, and had left the participants too dazed or too insolently triumphant for any natural way of partnership to emerge for another half-century to come. But among the conquerors in that savage struggle the ruling class produced individuals to whom the memory of agony witnessed was remorse as well as glory, who were resolved—while their own people entered on that course of complacency that is only now finishing—to prevent exploitation of the conquered. But this is not a fair summary of the cause of these clashes between official and unofficial

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Briton. Rectitude, and, especially, magnificent consciousness of rectitude are not endearing qualities, except to their possessor; the unofficial Englishman, who has written few memoirs and whom the Historic Muse knows chiefly as the culprit snubbed or actively set right in the Minutes and policies of an Administration whose power was unchallenged through so long a period, had a case. He can be shown to have been in the wrong, almost consistently; but how offensive the reformer of the world, the person both wealthy and aggressively good, can be, the Anglo-Saxon and his American cousins have by now convinced everyone but themselves.

But at Gangapahar, as in most civil and military stations—where the unofficial Englishman came on almost sufferance and occasionally, from the wilder fringes, like a countryman visiting his cathedral city on a day not the market day—the outward face of affairs remained peaceable; and John Carmichael Lyon proved himself the worthiest accession the Miani Light Horse had re-

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ceived within living memory. He was their crack pig-sticker and polo-player, he started the first bobbery pack in this part of Upper Bengal, and when a correspondence burst out in the columns of the *Britisher* in the autumn of 1915 about the question, he was said to have been the first man in the province who speared a leopard from horseback. But this was disputed by "Old Quy Hai," who unearthed from his aggregation of fifty years of hearsay and unreliable tradition an obscure story of the feat having been accomplished by an indigo-planter in the late forties. The point is of minor significance, for—as "Old Quy Hai" himself in the end handsomely admitted (thereby cunningly waiving the further question of the poorness of his proofs)—Lyon's accomplishment was sufficiently comprehensive to be able to allow of another's possible precedence in this or that achievement. There was no one else who could do every thing, as he could, and with equal certainty.

All the same, I do not like seeming to give up that leopard-spearing claim. Going over

the *Britisher's* files again, I am impressed by the flimsiness of "Old Quy Hai's" tale. He alleges that the planter lived at Barauli, and was named Barker. Now I know Barauli well; there is a Bowker (but no Barker) on a tombstone in the little civil cemetery (date of death, 1851), and the signature "Cyril Bowker" (undoubtedly Bowker) can be traced on a faded document in the cutcherry. To begin with, then, "Old Quy Hai" obviously got the name wrong. And if it be true, as Winterton told me—and Winterton knew everything, and was always the first to write to the *Britisher* about any Anglo-Indian question—that "Old Quy Hai" was Sir Joseph Cumberlege, I think we need not discuss the story further!

But Lyon had more than health and physical efficiency. He had a sunny freedom from suspicion that anyone was, or ever could be, unfriendly disposed, that went far to make his popularity genuine. He had also brains, ambition, and the power to work undistractedly. Any one of these things, the last two most of all, is enough almost

infallibly to take a man to the top of his profession in India. Nature and custom so demand a relaxation during the mid-day of the summer months, that the man who can force himself to sit erect and to work, after the bearers have salaamed and gone to their sleep and the glass doors have been barricaded against the swooping dragons of fiery wind, is by virtue of this single gift alone one of a small field. He has overcome more than himself if he has said, "This is May, breathless and stifling after a sleepless night. I know that if I yielded to impulse and went to my bedroom to lie down 'for five minutes' I should immediately pass into a drugged slumber that nothing could break before evening. But I will keep myself (with a wet towel, frequently renewed, round my head if necessary) and my miserable punkahwallah awake, *and get this job done.*" His peers in austerity will be men who can toil mercilessly as men hardly anywhere else; but their number will be few. Nor will they all be ambitious men. Ambition of a really energetic kind is rare in India. Then, without straying

into sedition and asking ourselves whether the Indian services, civil and military, have been as wonderfully gifted as they have through a century kept on assuring their admiring fellow-countrymen at home, we can see that John Lyon could hardly have failed to proceed from carefree subalternity to (at last) hale and cheery brigadierhood. He would have commanded a station or a punitive force, or even a provincial army, and while his body was still in almost undiminished vigour.

All this would have been—if Hester Morrison had not come to Gangapahar. Even with her coming, it would have been—if she had been worthy to marry into the Miani Light Horse. But she was not. Her father was just on the fringe of recognisable social status, as the Mianis saw things. It was doubtful what rank he had held when he first came to India; commercial, some said; anyway, it was something low and disgraceful. He was now a semi-retired official of the Public Works Department, his position apparently indeterminate; and a considerable

outsider in his own right, very little of the polished gentleman and very much of the polished bore. He had been taken on in the country, a terrible thing. But as to his daughter, it is almost enough to say that she could make you forget even her father. Her beauty bewildered and eluded, it was not such as the mind could photograph; you took away no clear picture, as you did of the half score or so of other Gangapahar ladies whom a reasonably tolerant opinion passed as good-looking, but only a sense of your blood quickening at thought of her. It was the way her head had turned when she spoke to Major Wrenn; or the infinitely leisured—and infinitely lovely—way she had drawn on her gloves when going away that evening; she had suddenly *appeared* out of the crowd on that ballroom floor, and you had stumbled against your partner and never been forgiven since. It was after she had gone from your sight that you were apt to be most conscious of her, and conscious in new ways. Tom Felvus used to quote Virgil of it—*vera incessu patuit dea*.

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Ambrosial tresses round her head
A more than earthly fragrance shed.
Her falling robe her footsteps swept,
And showed the Goddess as she stept.

If young Lyon had merely fallen in love, it would not have mattered. It was easy to fall in love in India; and the whole mess, and members of other messes besides and of corporations outside all messes, were prepared to fall in love with Miss Morrison. But Lyon married her. He had done his flirting manfully, as he did all his regimental devoirs, and no lady in Gangapahar had had cause to complain of any remissness, until Miss Morrison came. It was an age and a country which exacted a certain amount of gallantry—more than a merit, it was a definite due in that exiled fragment of Victorian England. Lyon had rendered unto Caesar's wife and daughter what belonged to them—cheerfully, efficiently, ungrudgingly, but nevertheless as a due, for he was far more interested in other matters. He was happy in himself and in exercise, in the swift

and delightful movements of his own limbs and mind; he was keen on his work and anxious to get on to more specialised departments of it; he was extraordinarily fond of the country, and not simply as a place to shoot in. All this was why he fell in love with Miss Morrison so madly that he must marry her. She was by no means as madly in love with him; but she was clever enough to know what the whole of her world knew, that John Carmichael Lyon was the star subaltern of the Mianis, and was not going to end as a mere captain or major. If he had been also the richest subaltern, he would have been perfection; but he was, as a matter of fact, one of the poorest. However, she was willing enough to marry him, and was able to persuade herself into a considerable infatuation for him, that was pretty to see. Attractive in himself, with the Mianis as a background he was dazzling.

There was annoyance when Lyon's intentions were known; among the regiment's womenfolk was an emotion far more explosive and bitter. "That hussy" was not

going to be brought over their sacred threshold and installed as one of themselves—to be one day (no one doubted it) the presiding lady of the regiment. That she had captured the best subaltern was a minor offence in comparison with her readiness to lower the prestige of the proudest group in India. She was an adventuress, a creature who had set her cap at a guileless bachelor, an unscrupulous climber with an odious father (this, at least, was true—and Alexander Morrison, interminably garrulous, was constantly on view to remind you of it), a cat—in brief, a person who proposed to come into the Mianis, not from the I.C.S. (which would have been excusable, though not desirable) but from a position as subordinate and humdrum as could be found. The Colonel, instructed by his lady, said it could not be allowed. He sent for Lyon, and reasoned with him in a bluff, fatherly fashion. He found to his surprise that, in addition to the inevitable and commendable pride that his subaltern cherished as a member of the Miani Light Horse, he

possessed a stiff obstinacy entirely personal. He had given his word, he said. "Quite so," agreed the Colonel; and noted a look in the young man's flushed though respectful gaze which made him refrain from adding "If it had been to a lady of our own rank—not that I've anything against Miss Morrison, *in her own station*—but we know what her father is, and that she is not the kind of person we can receive as one of the Mianis—if it had been to someone else, I should agree. But she would quite understand, and she would not wish to force herself into a regiment that did not want her."

Perhaps it would have saved Lyon much subsequent unhappiness if he had reported the interview to Miss Morrison; but he was too ashamed and bitter to do it, and would have died—or, more likely, have seen that someone else died—rather than hurt her self-respect. To his Colonel he said abruptly, that he loved Miss Morrison and intended to marry her. Colonel Forsyth decided it was a case for temporising; and was lost. He was never able to bring about that subsequent

discussion with young Lyon in a saner mood, that he promised himself. Moreover, he was too easy-going to feel the enormity of what was proposed as passionately as others felt it. And Lyon, acting with a precipitate and ruthless vigour that temporarily immobilised the slow-moving mass of the opposition, married Hester Morrison, and entered upon a life of maddening insolences and slights.

There is no need to detail these, or to explain the subtle ways in which Mrs. Lyon was made by the ladies of the regiment to feel that she was an intrusion in their midst. Her smouldering rage reinforced her husband's fierier anger, and an explosion was only a matter of time. He had changed more than anyone could have believed—and in a shorter time than could have been believed. You cannot remain careless and unself-conscious if you are being cold-shouldered by every group you meet, and insulted in ways that you cannot actively resent though blazingly aware of them. Most of all it is hard when women choose to humiliate a

man, for society forbids him to reply. If the sex feels its reputation for unfairness, it can know how it has been gained, if it thinks of the countless women of little brains or imagination who have considered themselves entitled to say things to men which men are not supposed to answer. Lyon had to endure all this. But his stars, that had forsaken him, so far relented as to do him one last service. They determined it that when the explosion came it was against a man and in circumstances that put him in the right—a great thing, when it would have been so easy for him to be technically in the wrong. Indeed, this was a very gracious and unlooked-for favour; for when a man is savagely aware of being solitary with a crowd against him and is all his moments brooding over sense of injustice inflicted, it is more than easy, it is almost inevitable that when he breaks out the dullest brain should be able to see plainly that he was inexcusable. That is why naval and military court-martials are so satisfactory to those who conduct them—anyone can see, cannot help

seeing, that the accused has been given every chance and that absolute, flawless justice (which in civilian affairs so rarely operates) has been done. But Lyon was helped. The most insolent of his fellow-officers was the Adjutant, Captain Spencer-Rivers. He had himself paid much court to Miss Morrison; but, being married, could have no personal reason for resentment of Lyon's action. He had been just a little snubbed by the lady, who had the sense to feel patronage in his admiration. But everything he did had patronage in it. His wife, a gentle person whom he treated with little consideration even in public, went further than the other regimental ladies in showing friendliness to Mrs. Lyon. Six years had worn thin for her the glamour of belonging to the Mianis. But Captain Spencer-Rivers checked her advances, and in manner to Lyon became more offensive than ever. Being Adjutant, he was able to gall him under circumstances when no retort was possible without entailing ruin; and in a short time it was certain that if ever two men

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in India hated each other, it was these two. The fact became sufficiently patent to alarm the Major, Hewitt, a not remarkably noticing man; he was already aware of an uncomfortably inflammatory state of things when it was brought to his clearer notice by Tom Felvus, a young civilian who was rather a friend of the Mianis and a frequent guest of theirs. Hewitt noted that in Felvus' opinion one of these days there would be murder and had just decided to speak to "that ass Spencer-Rivers," when the Adjutant himself blundered.

It was an October evening, and there was an informal assemblage in the old courthouse of Gangapahar, which served the station as a Club. It had been convened to discuss a proposed race-meeting before the Mianis and other military units went out on manoeuvres. Lyon arrived late; no sports discussion would be complete in his absence, but he had been detailed for duty at an out-station some miles away, where the Mianis had a detachment of recruits drilling. He came in hot and tired and angry, and

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strolled across to the notice-board to run his eye over a number of papers stuck up to indicate who had dogs or horses or furniture to sell. A group of men—as it happened, mostly Mianis—were at a table, helping themselves to drinks. As Lyon read, he heard Spencer-Rivers' tones; his ears tingled, for he knew at once that he was meant to overhear.

The insolent voice rose, and cut across to him, beating down all intermediate conversation. To his embittered heart, it seemed addressed directly to him, as though they two were alone in the room. "All I can say is, if a man cares so little for the regiment that he doesn't mind how he offends public opinion, there ought to be some way under Queen's Regulations by which you can turn him out."

Lyon saw Captain Martyn nudge the Adjutant, and heard a low voice speak in warning. He stepped across. "Were you making those remarks with reference to me, sir?" he asked.

"Never mind whom I was referring to,"

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Spencer-Rivers bellowed. "If the cap fits you can wear it."

Lyon was too enraged to notice that Spencer-Rivers had been drinking too much. But he had this excuse for not seeing it, that the Adjutant, having a strong constitution, had managed to form the habit of doing his work with reasonable efficiency, although there were few hours of the day when he could be considered altogether sober.

"And you address your superior officer with respect, sir," blustered Spencer-Rivers furiously. "And break into the conversation of gentlemen when you are invited, and not before."

The next moment he was staggering against a chair. Lyon, beside himself, followed up, and would have knocked him down; but half a dozen men separated them.

Captain Martyn, the senior officer present, spoke. "I must place you under arrest, Lyon."

"No, you don't," said a voice angrily. Felvus came up. "I heard—and a whole lot of us heard—what that cad Spencer-Rivers

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said when Lyon came in. This isn't going to be a regimental affair at all. I promise you, I'll see to that." He was almost as angry as Lyon had been. "If a man is going to be insulted about his private affairs and to have to hear the lady he has married discussed in public, he has a right to hit out, Adjutant or no Adjutant, superior officer or no superior officer. Spencer-Rivers is a hound. Also, he's drunk."

"That's right," cried another man excitedly; he was Wintringham, an indigo-planter. "There are a lot of us who've noticed what young Lyon's had to go through."

The Mianis present awoke to the fact that there was a majority hostile to them. "You almighty Mianis", Felvus went on ragingly, "if Lyon's broken over what that vile fellow"—and in those days *fellow* was a term that in itself carried insult—"has considered himself entitled to say and do for weeks past, I'll get the matter taken into Parliament, if it means resigning my service here and going home."

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A sense of shame and fairness stirred in the Mianis. But things were looking ugly. It is not often that a free fight has broken out among Englishmen in India, with native servants present to see it. But it *has* happened and it seemed likely to happen now. Martyn saved the situation in time.

"There's sense in what you men say," he conceded. "But I'll have to put Lyon under arrest. There's no way out of it—Queen's Regulations—discipline, you know. But I pledge my word of honour that he gets fair play. If it comes to a court-martial, you men will be called as witnesses."

Felvus' sense of responsibility as the District Collector came also to help the situation. "Right," he said. "Lyon, old man, you'll have to put up with it. But there are some of us who'll see you through."

There was no court-martial. Mr. John Carmichael Lyon resigned the Queen's commission.

After such a close to the career his father had imagined for him, Lyon was not pre-

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pared to return to England, nor would he have been welcomed there. His announcement of resignation was answered by the intimation that his allowance would cease. Leaving the regiment in which his father had served through the Mutiny, he had committed the unforgivable offence. Colonel Lyon sent him out four thousand pounds to clear his debts and then to fend for himself. Lyon, consulting no one—for his pride, the fiercest and deepest of all his faults, was hurt beyond the possibility of allowing him to meet anyone he knew, if he could possibly avoid him—bought a poor tea-plantation in the hills, and disappeared.

Angry years followed. He was unwilling to accept the logic of his new position and to throw himself into the life of the planter-community. He was soon as unpopular with them as he had once been popular with the Mianis. The men, who had heard rumours of his wrongs and his fall, might have been tolerant and have waited for a better mood to come to him. But their womenfolk resented a self-esteem that was at no pains to

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hide its conviction that it had entered a lowlier sphere than that which belonged to it of right. Lyon lived a hermit-life, behind a reserve past which only one or two Europeans, and those not members of the planting fraternity, broke. His wife was even bitterer than he. After the admiration she had received, this new life displeased her. It was not so much John Carmichael Lyon she had fallen in love with, as a position in the Miani Light Horse. And this new Lyon, a brooding, ageing man, was a very different person from the dashing subaltern of Gangapahar. That he loved her and was patient with her childish resentments and her foiled vanity must be reckoned to his credit; that she bore him three children and endured his wounded pride and never-slumbering disappointment and wrath must be reckoned to hers. It was in giving birth to the third child, a boy who lived only a few minutes, that she died. She had endured seven years of wretchedness and disillusion.

After his wife's death, Lyon was probably not as unhappy as he persuaded himself he

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was. Of all the idiotic and unnecessary ways in which men torment themselves, this sham loyalty to a false notion of their character, their duty, or their history is one of the worst. Lyon began as a deeply injured man; he continued as one who felt that he ought to be one, and that men expected him to be one. If he had paused to look at himself as he was he might have saved himself. He was not a sensual man, and he never formed any illicit connections with his own coolie women, as other planters did. He drank little. There would have been every chance of sheer physical well-being making life worth while if he could have attained to some peace within. For he was a man who found it hard to keep from becoming deeply interested in his surroundings. This interest was less easily stirred by people than by scenery and wild things, of which he had abundance in the densely forested valley on whose slopes his tea-garden made a lighter green patch. But he never gave his mind a chance. In the first place, it was exacerbated, as we have seen, by his sense of what was fitting.

But it was naturally a mind that could not forget the past. The Miani Light Horse had been to him less a regiment than a career and vocation; and he kept returning upon the gross injustice—all the more painful because there was nothing he could pick on in which the outside world would sympathise with his resentment—with which he had been turned out into this life of isolation and obscurity. His bitterness affected his body, and aged him rapidly. It made him reckless of what tricks he played his health. There was no planter who so ignored elementary rules of wisdom or paid so scant heed to sun and seasons. What he felt or thought he had to do he did, just when the doing occurred to him. Malaria became more or less constant with him, and often it was only ruthlessness that kept him going. His constitution was superb, but it was a bank on which he drew the heaviest of overdrafts.

One circumstance, especially, might have made him a reasonably happy man. His two girls, who from their first ability to walk ran wild in the valleys round their home, were

delightful beings, and Nicolette, the younger, was his dearest and closest companion. She herself was unaffectedly and absorbedly happy; and there were times when the mere vision of her beauty and contentment was enough to banish even her father's scrupulous self-tormentings. Her sister Kitty was less content with wild things and wild life. But during childhood the convent school in Darjiling and visits to other planters' families—with whom she soon became a favourite—satisfied that craving for admiration and society which had been her mother's before her. To their father the first day of the holidays was a festival eagerly anticipated and the day of their return to school one of mourning. But Darjiling was near, and he found occasion to visit it often in term.

Meanwhile his tea-planting went none too well. He had undertaken it after only six month's apprenticeship on another garden, and he never really learnt the business. And he had more than his share of ill luck, which culminated about the time when his wife's death left him excessively depressed and

careless of himself. He had floods that washed away terraces that had taken immense labour to build; his plants had epidemics of disease and visitations of insects; there was a quarrel among his coolies, involving murder, which got his garden a bad name, so that he had trouble in procuring labour. He struggled on for another four years, and then in a mood of disgust and depression applied to the Samodar Zemindari Company for employment. The Company was new and was expanding fast, taking over the estates of spendthrift rajas and bankrupt indigo-planters. It was glad enough of Lyon's offer, and appointed him officer in charge of the Trisulbari and adjacent zemindaries, that lay in a huge tract of almost uncharted jungle wedged in between Bengal and the beginnings of Central India. Lyon did not mind how remote his habitation, for he had long ceased to care about mixing with his kind. But three years of this loneliness completed Miss Kitty's adolescent discontent—a thing that came to her precociously, with in-

frequency of visits to other gardens and with only the terms at school as a variation from leagues of sal and teak and dhak and whispering kurchi. She became so moping and uncomfortable a house-mate that her father sent her to school in England. He was able to do this because he had sold his tea-plantation on accepting service with the Zemindari Company—sold it at a price ruinously below its value, but sufficient to make his mind easy about Kitty's expenses to and in England. Also, his father died and, contrary to his word, left him a small legacy. Nicolette he kept with him for another three years, though she was little more than a year younger than Kitty, partly because he could not well afford the double expense, but more because he could not bear to lose her companionship. Nor was she anxious to go. She had found the new wilderness as attractive as the old—in some ways it laid an even closer hold upon her spirit, with its vast spaces and the upland levels where you could ride at a gallop for miles and the air was crisp and dry and clean. But when

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Nicky was sixteen she was sent to join her sister for two years—desolate years to her father.

Lyon had been ten years in the Trisulbari jungles when our story begins, in 1900. Kitty and Nicky had been back from England some nine months.

CHAPTER II

I

BEHIND the bungalow the hill rose abruptly. To the west was a gentle ascent, with winding path; but here it was hardly a dozen yards from the compound wall, before you were blocked by five hundred feet of forested steepness, upthrust with almost a crag effect. In the Rains this flung down its waters as soon as gathered, in a tossing cataract that would have swept away the bungalow a score of times over, if it had not fallen sheer to a deflecting rock. For the rest of the year the mountain towered dry and green, a whispering face of woods.

The bungalow was embedded in the jungle—so deeply that the wilderness all but washed over it. Sals came close, a muffling silence. Athwart them a road, badly weeded, its surface pocked and rutted, cut jaggedly; it passed between an avenue of teak-trees, which gave a queerly boxed and conventional aspect to the forest that sprawled behind

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them. They were its hedge, and it an ordered garden. The "garden" was kept polled, both for fuel and protection. But when the steaming heats called out the race of green blood in the clipped, imprisoned thing, Nicky Lyon saw its passion of escape and fulfilment. All through the cool, wind-caressed, languidly happy hours of winter it was acquiescent. Then the heat waxed to its intolerable fullness, and it became a crushed and crouching beast, miserable in its cage. The drums of the monsoon thudded on the hills, the rain came sluicing down, hour after hour steadily, as if it had never rained since the world's beginning. The sky expanded with the sun. Now how terribly the boughs strained upward!

Last winter they had had a guest, a Swede who had joined the zemindari company that employed Nicky's father. Hallstrom had told them of a meadow in his native land, within the Arctic Circle, which they called "the Wonder Meadow"; in the six weeks of summer, when there was sunlight day and night, it was a pampas of pansies two feet

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high and with flowers the palm of your hand across. It had been known to produce two hay crops, in the swift, rejoicing season of its power. It was like that here, when sun and rain were tugging together at the living creature whose limbs were these innumerable leaping branches. It was enough to frighten you, this vision of seething, incessant turmoil, of *life* that had vaster gulfs and fiercer waves than any ocean. Men dreaded it, and warred against it. All through the period of the forest's strain and struggle to break free, Lyon had his servants busy, their bill-hooks were slashing. "Down! down!" The wild creature was tamed and cabined in, was left cowering—this, that should have been a tall green flame waving before the wind, was mere smouldering underbrush.

Three weeks after her return from England last December, Hari Singh had brought her a full-grown leopard in a wooden trap. There was barely room to house its limbs; it had been one magnificent anger, quivering to the tip of its tail, which hung outside the bars—

she had stopped the servants from what they thought the first-rate fun of tugging at the tail. Strength and perfect beauty, shaking with a very passion of hatred—she could see it now, couching by compulsion and not of choice, a wind of fury that could find no flag to betray its presence, except the tail that danced and leapt like a tufted reed.

2

All this, of course, was absurd. But it was a child who had watched this land and its changing face, for sixteen years. Two years in England had followed—happy enough years, for it was not easy for Nicky to be unhappy, but years of deprivation and of eagerness for return. She had returned, to find, contrary to all prediction, that the wilderness had kept its old face for her, and that she had returned to it as to a home.

She never thought of the woods except as living; she never thought it strange that in this land God was often pictured as many-

faced. She had *seen* his visage change. It had reddened with anger, under brows of storm; it had trembled into the gentle benediction of twilight; it had grown sleepy and brooding with the moon-rays. Season followed season, like moods across a face—and that face the one in all the universe that is vividly alive. Men, who are phantoms, gaze on it; and, even while they are—as they think—giving it shape and a name, they themselves have vanished.

3

The steep promontory hid the hill from the bungalow. But if you went a few hundred yards to the west the whole ascent lay open to the summit, that was sundered from its precipitous outlier by a deep cleft. It was mid-August, the air soaked with the monsoon; and this morning, that was free from rain, you heard the water falling. The ascent glistened with its double glory of new growth and of clinging drops. The summit itself was a lifted three fingers of naked rock startlingly human from below—as if the

Power of this place were buried under this mass of crag and jungle, but pushed up a part-uncovered hand, of appeal or menace. It was strange what difference the sky's shifting moods made to those stiff fingers. Now, with the matted thunderclouds looming blackly over them, they were wrath and threatening. You expected the whole fist to emerge, and to be clenched. Men called the mountain from them, Trisul, which is a trident, weapon of Siva the Destroyer.

It was past noon when the rain began again. All the steaming morning galleons of cloud had sailed over the sky, too scattered an armada to veil the earth from the sun's cruelty—a magnificent march and counter-march, ineffective and splendid as an Asiatic army. When they passed across the sun they intensified his furnace, and a redoubled heat came through. Distances were blurred and fogged, and you could feel the mist rising thickly. Then there was a sudden darkening, the clouds blackened, rain settled in for the day. Instantaneously, the air was cleansed with swift, cool arrows.

NIGHT FALLS ON SIVA'S HILL

It was a relief when the rain returned. A month since, the monsoon had taken its kingdom by storm; but it reigned like an established dynasty now, and the interspaces of sun were ended quietly. It was but the muffling up of light with a blanket, and the steady resumption of the season's main business, the drenching of the world.

4

Nicky had spent the morning by the quarry, where the hill turned to the north-west. The forest here was scarred to the bone, its limestone rocks were blanched and bloodless. Trisul humped itself above the plain like a couching elephant, and the quarry was an old wound the sun had whitened. Before ever the Samodar Zemin-dari Company had bought this hill, with estates over the area of half a province, a German building group had tried to market its stone. It was they who had built the

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bungalow; they had left an inscription above the porch and graves in the garden. The Zemindari Company still, in a half-hearted fashion, cut the stone; all day long you could hear the monotonous chipping. But it was only a pretence; John Lyon wasted little time overseeing the half-dozen coolies whom the rocks employed. So long as there was a sufficient accumulation of stone for the zemindari's needs, with a truckload for the occasional order from elsewhere, he was satisfied. The leisurely smiting of hammer on hill made an under-rhythm to your thoughts, like the lapping of water beneath leaves. Where Nicky sat, on a boulder shadowed by the low-sweeping, densely tressed boughs of a gold mohur, it was nigh to the waterfall, too; the sudden gusts of wind washed her green cave of shelter with the cool sweetness of the rain.

That waterfall was "the Nymph's Leap." It was a name so conventional as to be devoid of all loveliness, had Nicky known. But words came to her unrudded and clean, shining with the azure of her own thought.

NIGHT FALLS ON SIVA'S HILL

She knew little of Vauxhall, and less of Fontainebleau. But she did know something of Hellas—and that once this earth had borne a race who had gazed on blue, unbounded seas and clear, unfathomed skies, their minds free of fog as their home was. She knew that for them the bubbling water and ferny brake had concealed beings more than mortal, yet with bodies like ours though unblemished. So to her this hill was Arcadia, the gold mohur that comforted her against the heat had for living heart a dryad. That swift, delicious, sliding water, behind whose arching glory masses of maidenhair clustered on the dripping rock, could not be unhaunted.

Her human veins betrayed her. Had she been of the earth, earthy, like these woods and hill that she loved as friends, they themselves would have sufficed. But they did not, until she had thrown over them a glamour cast from minds that had lived long ago. They must have their nymphs and oreads, to

“strike a glory through the mist”—

through that hanging, creeping curtain of rain that sometimes enveloped the slopes for days together, when July was feeding the famished land. Nicky remembered when for a whole month she had moved through her forest in a dream because of two lines of verse read in a review that lay in an out-house, piled up with scores of other papers:

“Young men, whom no one knew, went in
and out,

With a far look in their eternal eyes.”

It had been ecstasy, to think of these glades that opened in the sal jungles, peopled so. The divine inconsequence of the godlike visitants—their imperception of the lovely earth on which they trod—the mysteriousness of their errands—within their eyes (that looked past you and beyond you) those gulfs in which all thought went out!

She had kept her vision to herself, till she had nearly quoted the lines to Kitty, and that had broken the spell. Kitty had been so electrified by the first two wonderful words,

that Nicky had reddened and stopped. After all, Kitty also had her own vision; to her, young men were creatures with whom you danced and talked—they gave you “a good time,” and you dazed and enchanted them, so that they said delightful things to you—sooner or later one of them married you. They were all too few, unfortunately, and the eligible ones still fewer. Within easy reach of Trisulbari they hardly existed.

Kitty had been especially fretful that day when Nicky had so strangely—for once—begun a remark that promised to be worth making. “What were you saying about young men?” she asked.

Nicky’s blood raced to her cheeks. “Nothing,” she said. “I was only wondering why the Company don’t transfer Daddy, with all his experience, to Calcutta, and send some younger man here.”

“It’s the last thing they’ll ever do,” said Kitty discontentedly. “He’s been out in these horrid jungles so long that I believe everyone thinks he must have a touch of the tar-brush, or he wouldn’t be kept here. I

could have *killed* that little snob of a Collector who made himself so free of Dad's hospitality when he came shooting here, last cold weather; and then looked at me as if he was sure I ought to be black somewhere. Remember how he kept fishing to find out who our mother was? But"—her mind, flitting over a wide surface of grievance, settled where it had sprung from first—"Dad'll never get out of this place. Old MacQueen has sat tight at Calcutta until now he's got his son there. Trust a Scotchman to see that nothing goes outside the family if he can help it!"

"But that's hard on *us*, Kitty," Nicky pointed out. "For Dad's as much a Scot as they are."

"Yes. But you won't get anyone to believe that now."

5

If Nicky had lived all her life in England, the rain would have caught her to-day. But the sultriness, suddenly intensifying, had

warned her. A handful of dry leaves flapped against her shoes. It was not a gust, though it ought to have been the beginnings of one; it was like the tug of a small dog, recalling his mistress from danger. She rose, and went quickly to the house. Almost simultaneously with her arrival the rain fell, as abruptly and densely as though it were the dropping of a woollen curtain.

Had Nicky been alone, either in person or in thought, the afternoon would have been part of a blessed eternity—so timeless, so unrelated was the web of its sensations, with no thorns of question to tease its smoothness. Though the downpour was steady, within it were the actions of a spirit, now playful, now giving battle. It quickened, and drove fiercely across the world; the rain *raced* from that wielder of a flail at its heels, to whom its abounding rivers were so much chaff, a liquid dust. Then for a moment it was swaying mist, mere aerial dampness that was pushed and moulded, as children mould clay; but behind it, in forest spaces that you could not see, was the crashing of trees,

there was the trampling of armies and the clash of celestial steel. The Storm-Gods rode to war, with their horses' yellow manes tossed high; maddening their steeds with their stinging whips of rain. The whole vanished, like the momentary vision of elves to the shepherd who wakes on Eildon Hill on Midsummer Morning; there was again nothing but the unpausing, precipitous shower.

But Kitty was fuming. Twenty-five miles away was a forest-officer's bungalow; Mrs. Dermott was housing two young assistants of her husband, and Fanny Dermott, realising that it would be more comfortable all round if Tom Steele also had a girl to play with, leaving his brother Will free to give his undivided attention to her, had invited Kitty over. There would be dancing, cards, jungle rides and shoots; even the long evenings darkened with the steady rain would be cosy, with the shadow of masculine admiration over one. Kitty, with her lively, pleasantly rounded figure and bright fine eyes and healthy complexion, was a favourite

in places where they dance. She was jolly and comradely, she could walk beside you chatting while you carried a gun—could use a gun herself, with reasonable efficiency; she laughed a great deal, and laughed naturally and easily, and her amusement had a low ignition-point, especially when it was masculine humour that struck upon it. She was the kind of girl that women always agree is “simply *beautiful*, my dear—really lovely.” And, even if there were men, a few here and there, who remained stupidly impervious to charms so obvious and so dazzling, the majority of those whom chance or work sent to these womanless wilds found her a more than adequate companion. Altogether, a thoroughly nice girl to have with a fellow.

Between Trisulbari and the Dermotts' house, five miles away from the former, ran the river Tamravali. Through nine months of the year this was merely four miles' breadth of bare sahara, but now it was draining a country as big as Scotland, on to every inch of which water was sluicing most of the twenty-four hours. Yet even this need

not be impassable. The river was wide rather than rapid; and just now it was performing its functions so efficiently that a day without rain saw a noteworthy shrinking. A week of comparative lull, such as had preceded our story's beginning, would pull it down to fordable proportions. When the day had set in, and continued, fine, Kitty's hopes had soared; towards noon, she had ridden to its banks and satisfied herself that to-morrow both horse and baggage-coolies could cross. Then this rain had chased her helter-skelter home; it had not improved her temper to be drenched to the skin. She was trying to play patience; but she was tugging fretfully at her sister's mind.

"It's the devil, having this rain now. I shoved Ladybird almost halfway across the river, and it hardly came to her girths. If it had only kept off for another day, I could have got over."

"But would you have got past the *khal* at Chaturdanga?"

This was meant comfortingly; it suggested that the cup which Fate had dashed down

had been further from the lips than it seemed. But the question exasperated Kitty. "Mercy, Nicky! are you an idiot? If I could get through the river, the *khal* wouldn't stop me."

"It stopped our bullock-carts a week ago."

"Yes. Because the fool who was in charge was blind drunk, and missed the ford."

"I know it's nothing beside the river for *width*," Nicky admitted. "But it's deeper; and swifter. The whole of the water has to rush between two walls. I've had to turn back from it in winter, after only a few days' rain—when there was hardly a trickle in the river."

Kitty could think of no answer, but, "You drive me crazy." Silence followed. But Nicky, looking at her sister's resentful face downcast on her cards, was remorseful. Facts were on her side; the *khal*, a swirl of steeply enclosed waters, *was* deeper than the river. Nicky, whose lonely rides took her infinitely wider afield than Kitty, and at all seasons and in wilder weathers, could at any

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time have estimated offhand, with fair accuracy, the depth of any stream for twenty miles round. But, seeing Kitty's wretchedness and disappointment, she felt she had been meanly pedantic.

She tried to make amends. "I know it's horrid, Kitty. I was hoping all the morning that it would keep off, and let you through."

"You mean, you were mooning away by yourself in some dull place, thinking of nothing but your own affairs. I can't *understand* you, Nicky. There's nothing to do, nothing to see, not a soul to speak to. Yet you just sit and dream and watch *nothing* happening. You're looking at this rain now, as if it were something to see!"

As we know, the mind is its own place and makes its heaven or hell. Kitty's mind resided in the healthy animal vigours of her body, the sap and vivid flush of first young womanhood. She was twenty, and in her limbs was the same green fire that wavers across the world in spring. She was naturally good-humoured enough, with tolerant glances towards her younger sister's dreamy

happiness. But her life was thwarting all her being strove for. During the last nine months one flirtation had succeeded another and the last one had been moving to something more serious when it finished for ever. Jim Allen, whom she had met when she was a guest at the generous Christmas festivities at Khatra, the railway centre—who had been one of the shooting camp with whom she had spent Easter—was to have joined her father as his assistant, a month before the monsoon was expected. That was why she had not gone to the hills, where summer would have passed in a round of delight; at Darjiling she had acquaintance with a score of planter's families in the valleys near by, and in the station itself would have been many friends. But Jim, who ever since he came to India had been looking for a better billet than any the Zemindari Company could give him, had married the sister of a man who was growing coffee in the Nilgiris, and had joined him as partner. John Lyon, in failing strength and hopefulness, had been left to carry through the summer alone; and his daughter, too

sore to mix with people who had known her partiality for Jim Allen, was stranded in the jungles for the Rains. Her mind kept pacing round and round the cage of its disappointment; it could have been confronted with nothing more exasperating than the vision of Nicky's profound contentment.

6

After tea, there was a lull in the rain. The cook brought his daily accounts, which Nicky as usual took. They had been settled, and to Kitty's vexation were succeeded by an informal, friendly conversation on his private affairs; this merged into a general round-table discussion in which all the servants took part. The water-carrier lamented changed times, and especially the high cost of rice since the coming of the huge camp for the bridge that Government were building over the Samodar river, twenty miles away. Kitty's book banged to the ground, and there was a noise as of an elephant wrecking

her chair. Though it was her pose that she did not understand the vernacular (hence Nicky had to run the house) she understood it very well; and mention of that camp at Jolpahari tormented her. Two presentable men were marooned there, both under thirty. And her father had refused to organise a week's shooting for them at Trisulbari! Said that shoots in the Rains were hell, anyway; and that, even if they weren't, he must get on with his wretched job of seeing that the zemindari ryots pushed their seed in.

Nicky's eyes opened wide, and there were lightnings in them. Fortunately, a syce appeared and asked for the horse-feed for to-night and to-morrow. Glad of the diversion, Nicky went with him to the stables. It was 1900—days before the motor-car was much more than dreamed of; the bicycle had only recently ceased to be a jest. Trisulbari was one of innumerable bungalows scattered over India, whose life looked out to a suburb of out-houses—sheds for traps and harness, and tenanted stalls. The zemindari oversight entailed riding far afield; horses—

at any rate, country-breds, which can get through an amazing amount of hard work—were cheap, their keep not expensive. John Lyon had four, and there were times when a fifth would have been a convenience. In a thousand bungalows, from the Himalayas to the Travancore hills, from the Punjab to Calcutta, there was no interest that competed with that of which the horses were the centre. Shooting? Yes; but that was one that held the menfolk only. Social life? But the jungle, where so many families lived perforce, where engineers bridged the rivers, forest officers watched the growth of sal and teak, collectors toured the villages—had no club, knew no social life except when Christmas or Easter camps were formed. Eros? Eros has wings, and flits in and away again. But a man's work stays by him.

If you had been in Calcutta, on any day of the Rains of 1900, you would have seen the long shop-front of Chowringhee beautiful with the neat traps that carried the memsahibs to their toils. The syce would be standing by the horse's head, with chowrie

fanning the flies away; when her shopping was finished, the memsahib would emerge, the shopboys would put her parcels in, she would get up and take the reins and drive off. Since it was smarter to keep and drive your own trap, the least athletic and enterprising of women had to take an interest in horses, if only in the one that drew her when shopping and in those of rival equipages. It was all very pretty and splendid, especially in winter, when not a mere sprinkling but the full gathering of English ladies were down from the hills. The motor car has left the great capitals of India drabber places than they were.

But if in Calcutta or Bombay or Lucknow or Delhi horses were the tinsel glitter on life, at Trisulbari they were almost its main framework. There was a tennis-court; but it rarely had players. There was a place for badminton; no one troubled to keep it weeded. But Nicky and Kitty rode—because everyone did it, because there was no other relaxation or escape, for the sake of health, because of habit and custom, because they

could thereby accompany their father on his cold weather tours, in Nicky's case because it opened up a way of wider comradeship with the wilderness. Without the horses' generous strengths she would have been confined to a narrow circuit of the bungalow; with them, it was herself received expansion, her writ was one that ran to the end of other wills and sinews than her own. By these subservient wills she came near to what was thought and felt by the brute creation. That mysterious world was in the woods about her—it lurked in copse and gulley, was a flashing wing amid the green, or a watchful eye where wolf or panther slunk aside at her coming. But a part companioned her and served her.

7

Walking over the mud that squelched and oozed beneath her boots, she rested in the friendly closeness of her world. The chorus of frogs and crickets was busy; in the gusts of light that partings in the trees revealed she could see bats flying; she overtook a scurry-

ing snake. These were sights and sounds that she knew; and the clouds, hanging low, had shut in this tiny section of earth from the rest of India and of the universe. In this blackness was the cosy comfort of a room; the lantern dispersed no more than made a quiet glow, as of a bedchamber lit by a sinking fire. Before she reached the stables her tread was known, and the swinging beams caught. A whinnied greeting came, deep-toned satisfaction that food and a familiar presence were approaching. Her father had taken with him Captain and Fanny; Black Diamond and Ladybird were left. Captain and Ladybird were country-breds, Fanny an arab, Black Diamond a waler.

She fed and petted her friends, and returned. The rain began again, solidly as ever; the veranda filled with refugees. Nicky went to her room, to change to evening shoes and frock. Kitty, in her anger feeling her sister's neighbourhood insupportable, went to her own room, and tried to read a novel. It proved impossible. Battalions of

insects flung themselves against the lamp; white ants shed their wings, crawled over the page, perched on her shoulders, tickled her back and neck. A moth with wings like sails blundered in, and poised itself above the funnel; it fell scorched, the lamp flared up and out, leaving a stink and black smoke. Kitty's hand shot out involuntarily, and was burnt. She leapt from her chair, and yelled for a servant, who was angrily ordered to bring a lantern at once. When it came, she attempted to settle to her book. But she was disturbed by some misery beneath her desk. Looking down warily, she saw a toad. It was bleeding; Kitty grew interested, beguiled out of her bad temper, watching what was to happen. A snout bobbed out and bit the toad, who screamed. Kitty sought her chance, and kicked at the snout when it reappeared; there was a squeak not the toad's, and she found she had killed a musk-rat. She was about to call Nicky and tell her, when she remembered that Nicky had been behaving most annoyingly. It was then—pausing midway to the door, with purpose arrested—

that she saw her dainty room filled with toads straddling their obscene way to corners. Her rage had reached the point where it needed victims; so she fetched an empty flower-pot from the veranda, crammed it tight, and shut them down with cardboard. The servant was again summoned, and the catch handed over for immediate execution. Nicky, aware only that there was an insurrection in her sister's smouldering world, heard glass-panelled doors slammed to, and their bars drawn. Presently a bearer respectfully informed her that Miss Kitty had gone to bed; she wanted no soup, with all these *pokas* (insects) about, but Miss Nicky could send in some *murghi* (fowl) and dessert when she had dinner. "She seems to think that this place is a hotel that I'm keeping," Nicky commented to herself.

So Kitty had done with the day; and it had been a reasonably bad one for her. But for Nicky it would have been a good one, if she had been sure of her father's comfort. On the veranda, if you were not trying to do any impossible thing, such as read, it was rest

sublimed to happiness, to listen to the hour after hour tumbling of the rain, satisfying the enormous hunger of the earth. It was lightening at intervals, and the darkness sat close to you, like an overshadowing, thick-furred beast, lifting and shutting its eyebrows. There was nothing unfriendly about it. You felt one with the earth, whose damp airs moved about you. Night had taken you into her cave, and shown you her creatures. This fern-owl, driven in almost lifeless and now cowering in her hand—she had never seen one before, and it quickened her sense of intimacy with her hidden fellows.

8

She was anxious about her father, who had gone to Salboni. Three years ago, the zemindari company had bought in the rights of the Salboni raja, who had drunk himself to death. It had proved a bad bargain. The ryots, who had been beaten and pillaged, were sullen. It was a slow business, persuading them to reclaim land that had

gone to jungle; also, a rich crop of feuds had grown up. The Bengal uplands are terraced, with low mud walls to hold the rains; and the peasant will often undermine the division between his plot and that immediately above, in order that the released water may merge the two fields and enrich his with a rush of silt. When boundaries are marked again, in the confusion he may gain a square foot here and a yard there. Where the poverty level is so low, and a barrowload of soil or the extra revenue of a rupee a month can raise a man to an economic competence that makes him envied, thefts so petty as to be almost comic are of common occurrence. Murder is done in the heat of a passion whose engendering fire is something worth a shilling or less. So word had reached John Lyon of hamlets in his new jurisdiction that were preparing open battle; the stronger accused a member of the other of having cut a *bund* (mud wall), and in reprisal intended to break down every bund belonging to the offender's village, draining the water off from the young rice. Lyon might have listened to Nicky, and have

waited a day, until his fever had fallen—but the report that passions were inflamed to the point of risk to himself if he interfered had been a challenge to his obstinacy. Under such a threat he would have risen and gone from his death-bed. The day our tale begins, he had ridden the thirty miles to Salboni; he would change horses midway, a syce having set out the evening before with Captain. He would spend the steaming hours arguing, cajoling, ordering; and start back, like the madly impulsive person he was, whenever the rain-wall seemed to have thinned enough for a mortal to push through it. She knew that he intended to return to-day; and there had been a slackening during the last hour of the afternoon before tea—a steady and heavy, but not sheerly remorseless downpour—which had been followed by a period of light drizzle, that had passed into drenching tempest again. The odds were—she knew how greatly they were—that he would have seized his chance to ride to where the syce was waiting in cover of an old hut with Fanny. Then, though the weather had

become impossible once more, he would still feel that it was better, even with a long stretch of shelterless country ahead, to push straight through. It would be a wretched experience, of course; but he had done similar things before. He had been weak after malaria when he started; Nicky knew that this very fact would be a strong inducement to him to thrust on, though drenched to the skin and with teeth chattering and body light and miserable, to reach the one place where he could get dry clothes and sleep. There might have been an affray—she knew these sudden excitements, when *latbis** are used and lives lost in a storm that springs up without any warning wind. Her father was just and generous; but he was proud—his enemies used harder words—and fearless, quick and hasty often. He might have precipitated a row, such as that Ramnagar one that had looked so dangerous last spring.

As the night darkened, she lost her joy in its free, exultant sounds and airs; she could think only of one sick figure, hardly knowing

*Clubs.

what he did, except that he must blindly push on. She spared a pang of pity for the brute that bore him—gallant, eager Fanny, so alert and quick-stepping, so nervous of each sudden movement in the sun-splashed glades. She could see her, confused—and stupid and spiritless at last—in those black, waterlogged paths. Driven at brimming ditches that she could not see—though she could hear, even in the remorseless swish of the unending rain, the deeper noise of their swollen brooks. Or swerving madly back, from the very brink, as the lightning laid bare the snakelike glimmer of hurrying waters. She might lose her footing, in some steeper way than she expected, or in the pools of the rivulets that were fast becoming rivers. Nicky's father, ill and beaten down, was at the mercy of the storm's frenzy and an overburdened beast. Nicky could not sit still, she peered and peered into the double night of rain and darkness.

At last she decided that the thought of his return this night was absurdity; she had better go to bed, with a spirit-stove and

lantern burning low, in case he did come. He *must* have stayed somewhere—most likely of all, he never set out. Somewhere, in some sort of hut, he must be sheltering. If this were England—Calcutta, even—he would have sent her a telegram, there would have been no worry. She smiled happily at the thought; and the measured pacing of the rain made her think of the man who brought their letters—telegrams, too, if there ever were any—loping steadily along the jungle paths. That was a jolly poem by Rudyard Kipling, *The Overland Mail*. She saw them all over India, these brown coolies who carried the mail-bags. She pictured them as a race, and fancied herself at the winning-post. One of the runners was gradually withdrawing from the rest, he was coming nearer, nearer. By the clank of his feet she could tell that he was not barefooted, but was wearing shoes. A burst of mad cheering greeted his approach. She wondered why that was—started forward to see, with a jerk that hurt her back—and saw . . . with wide eyes suddenly flung awake . . . that the rain had ceased,

and there was only a misty drizzle. Her body was discomfort; she was bitten all over, a fog of mosquitoes clung about her face. She sprang to her feet, and saw that the night was at turning, ready to waver towards dawn. The visionary runners of her dream were being cheered by the excited kokils—as nook awakened nook, the forest rang congratulation. At the foot of the veranda steps, Fanny halted, riderless.

9

As a sleeper who has rolled into icy waters, Nicky waked. She ran to the servants' godowns, and beat on the doors. The occupants were drowned in heaviness, their heads wrapt up against mosquitoes; hoping against hope that this clamour battering at the gate of their dreams was a part of them, they roused themselves belatedly and with groans. A syce appeared, swathed like a mummy and about as intelligent. Imperious in anger, his young mistress told him to follow her on the Salboni road, leading a

horse and trap. She vanished; and when he reached the stables was already tightening the girths of her own horse, Black Diamond. She repeated her commands, with emphasis on the need for haste—to a grass-cutter, drowsily hurrying up, she flung an order for Fanny's unsaddling. The syce was drawing the trap from its shed—she waved to him to drop the shafts, then aligned Black Diamond with a wheel, and swung herself up. She was past the bungalow when Kitty called her. Pulling in, she said across her shoulder, "Fanny's turned up alone. Wait till I can get back and tell what's happened." In any case, she added, Kitty would have to wait; for the only possible mount, her own Ladybird, was at that moment being harnessed. Kitty said she would drive Ladybird; it would be quicker than having her led. She was going in to dress, when Nicky remembered and wheeled sharply round and up to the veranda rails. "My brandy-flask, Kitty, that's a dear!" Kitty brought it.

It was the glimmering half-hour preceding dawn. The stars, fast fading, were a silvery

tremor, a thread unravelling from the grey-blue stuff that would presently be day. Nicky—whose body gathered in, with all its senses, the floating breaths of every minute, so that she *felt* the fragrance rising from the jasmine-bushes by the gate, constellated mounds of darkness swelling from the earth—could no more be unconscious of the beauty about her than the fish at lazy anchor can be unconscious of the sun warming his pool. But its impact was on an underworld of thought and sensation, her surface energies were dry above their waves. She had done with dreaming, her waking self was tense with fear. She scanned the hoof-marks in the sodden ground, her whole being an impersonal engine of command and inquisition. She had dashed through swamps and water-courses, and now faced a brook sufficiently swollen to have made not Black Diamond only, but Black Diamond's rider, hesitate on an ordinary occasion. But, gazing ahead, she noticed nothing—she simply swept aside the attempt to shirk the spinning eddies, and they were in mid-stream. A piece of drift-

wood bounced against them, with waving boughs that struck at Diamond's eyes. He recoiled, the rush of the current carried away his footing, he blundered off the causey which her father had built after the heavy rains of two seasons ago. They were in deep water, and the stream tossed up a muddy spray, drenching her to her bare head. Her annoyance—which she did not note till afterwards—was with herself for having ridden so close to the edge; at the moment all she was aware of was exhilaration—the sudden, delicious coolness of the river flooding round her hips, the challenge of danger, the realisation of immense strength in the muscles of the beast fighting for his life and hers. She would have thrown herself off to help him, knowing that the brook shoaled as quickly as it deepened; but the necessity had passed even while the thought was entering her mind. The tide was ebbing as swiftly as it had leapt up to soak her; they were plunging up a shelving beach, to safety.

She had gone five miles, unnotingly. On

this further bank, where the road climbed steeply over a low hill, she saw, as she crossed the stream, where Fanny had fallen. The earth beneath a wayside banyan's outjutting root had been washed away, leaving an arch of tough rope free. Fanny—dead beat, poor beast—had tripped in the storm and darkness; it was on the slope, her rider was fagged and heavy, she had gone down with him. He was sitting now on a stone, and had looked up at Nicky's shout (she did not know that she had shouted). His eyes were dazed with pain. But he knew her, and that first brightening of his face was not from any natural relief for himself, but sheer, involuntary gladness at her coming. She saw it—saw, too, how joy changed to anxiety to watch her trampling those swaying, uncertain waters. She realised how she loved him—that he could be so forgetful of his night of misery and danger, for her sake! Her dear, dear father—so wilful and proud and racked with bitter memories—yet so brave and unselfish and *good*—a gentleman wasting his force and fineness in this rough zemindari

work! She was crying as she knelt beside him, and felt his hand, hot and fevered, caressing her hair.

She brushed her tears away. "I'm a fool, Dad, when I ought to be helping." She remembered the flask. "*Why* did you go off to Salboni now? And you had fever the day you went!"

She passed her hand over his brow. "You've got it still," she said. "Oh, *why* did you do it?"

"I'd no choice but to go, dear. As it was, I was only just in time. Those fellows were spoiling for a scrap. Precious little chance there'd have been of getting in the zemindari dues if they had wrecked each other's fields."

She saw him wince, and cried, "Dad, what's happened to your left arm? You've been keeping it turned away from me!"

"I pitched on to shoulder and hand, and my wrist and collar-bone went." He pointed to his arm hanging stiffly. "Leave it alone, Nicky. We can't do anything till we get home. My word! but I'll be glad to shed these sopping things!"

He smiled, conscious of the absurd appearance he made, drenched from hours of unpausing rain. She looked at the lines that suffering vigil had set below his eyes; she felt as if the world had finished, and left these two forsaken in this desert.

He was solicitous again, as he saw her bitten face. Smiling, he said: "But this rain all night long did me one good turn. It kept the mosquitoes off. So, if my wetting has sent my fever up, at any rate they haven't. What have you done, Nicky? There was no need to sleep without a net."

She hesitated. Then, "I didn't go to bed. I was on the veranda."

"You mean, you spent the night awake, waiting for me!"

She corrected him quickly. "No, Dad, really! I fell asleep by accident."

"I can't believe it! It's only just dawning, and here you are! If you haven't been searching for me while it was dark, how on earth did you find out so soon that things had gone wrong?"

"Fanny came home without you."

"*Of course.* I had forgotten Fanny. And yet—my dear, you can tell how my mind has gone, for it was I who sent Fanny home. I knew it was my only chance. A long time after I came down, while I was lying here too miserable to do anything but groan I knew she was standing by, a sick, frightened brute. I had to pull myself together—I remembered that it took the Raipur *khal*, that runs into this, a good fifteen hours to collect and reach this; and there'd be no chance, once that happened. I dragged myself to my feet somehow, and made Fanny go through it. I know it was absolute hell, with her fighting back, and every movement shaking all down a rope of nerves—that's what my left side is, a rope of nerves and separate agonies."

"*My dear!*" She kissed him, wretched that he should have gone through so much pain.

"But I made her do it." He had, as his daughter, who drew her will from him, and all her fierce imperiousness, would have done. They both, when they had their own

spirits in hand, had the same direct, unescapable grip on animals that served them. "I made her do it, though she must have made me go a good third of the way across before she would go on herself. There was water to my knees by then, and I could hardly stand, I was so weak. She turned when I let go of her head; but I'd had the sense to bring out my flash"—he was very proud of his flash, in 1900 the newest mechanical toy—"and sent it suddenly right in her eyes. She was across before she knew what she was doing—with a bound that soused me from head to waist afresh. I heard her clip-clopping in the mud the other side."

"But you've come a good five miles," he continued, "And it isn't an hour since the rain stopped. And it was pitch-black till half an hour ago." He felt her clothes. "You're wet through."

"*My* fault, just now. I was fool enough to forget the causey edge. But try my left arm; you ought to find a dry spot there." She went on to explain. "Fanny arrived at the

end of night. I saddled up, and came at once. Kitty's driving Ladybird. She ought to be in sight soon."

She clambered up a ledge, and searched the distances. "But I can see nothing. I must get up higher." She coaxed Diamond level, and stepped from rock to saddle. He was sent scurrying up the slope; and from its summit she scanned the path till she picked out the trap.

"They're having trouble at Viharsi *khal*. But it won't stop them. There's nothing really bad until you reach this *khal*; and I've never known *this* one so bad before." She laughed gleefully. "If I were a properly brought up young lady, such as you find inhabiting novels—instead of a girl whom her Daddy has *most* inefficiently left to run wild—I doubt if I should have let my horse put hoof in that stream to rescue anything less than a lover. And now, my dear"—they were descending, Diamond was negotiating the rain-slippery steep, circuitously and with doubtful foot—"Lord knows how we're going to get you across. If you intend to

continue doing these mad, wicked deeds—and forgetting all about your two charming daughters, whom you're doing your best to leave orphans alone in the terrible wilderness—”

“There's precious little that a man could do that my two charming daughters can't do better. The younger, who yesterday was only a child, has just raced helter-skelter through the darkness and across a miniature Ganges.”

“It isn't above a yard deep at worst. Honestly, Daddy!”

“Add another foot. Remember, I saw it.”

“Because we stepped off the causey.”

She sat down beside him again. She had come out in a summer frock, whose dragged skirt was clinging to her, cold and heavy. Discomfort enough. But her spirits had leapt up from intolerable tension, when she had seen that the worst—which had happened so often in her fears—had not happened. It was she, the younger child, and not Kitty, who had the mother in her feeling for this unpractical, passionate, obstinate

NIGHT FALLS ON SIVA'S HILL

man; she had nothing of resentment against a will that had laid their lives in these desert wastes.

The sky was one far-winging clamour—of light so glowing and so rapid in its alternations that it had every quality of an exultant *shout*, except the actual noise. And Nicky's mind, released from its terror of the chill moment when she had jumped out of slumber to see Fanny's drooping outline halting riderless in the gloom, was a bird that frolicked on the waves of her exquisite, dancing body. She toyed with Diamond's bridle, and drew her favourite close, to pet him. Then she removed her shoe that had been swinging in the torrent; and, as she drained the water from it, she turned to her father a look of mock horror. He saw how much of the wind and sun had gone into his child's eyes; her face was brimmed with hiding laughter.

"This," he said, "is the charming daughter who would be so helpless if left alone in the jungles!"

"But think!" she replied. "Even if we *are*

reasonably safe from beasts—of the danger from *men!*”

“I find it easier to think of the danger *to* men. I should be sorry for any touring saheb who came across my daughter in distress. Or in triumph. But I’m not going to bandy gallantry with my baby. Nicky, dear! Nicky!”—he repeated her name; and yet again, as though it held all life’s sweetness for him, a dearness upon which he would have dwelt for ever—“Nicky! I guess I needed a shock to teach me sense. I’m going to be a sight more careful than I have been—for *your* sake.”

“There’ll be some good in this wretched business if you will, Dad.”

“As soon as I get back, I’m going to begin looking out for you, as the lady I’ve seen you this morning—and not the dreamy tomboy I’ve always imagined you.”

“As soon as you get back, you’re going to be sent to bed for a month, as the undisciplined, suicidal man that I’ve always known you were,” said his daughter. “But first I’ve got to get you across this bit of a brook

that's pretending to be a river. The trap will never cross it. And, if it could, I don't see Madame Ladybird venturing into it."

10

But in the end the trap crossed, after all, though only because Nicky, going upstream in search of a possible ford, had found a place where just a thin bund precariously held in the torrent. Kitty was still a good mile away when Nicky's heels jabbed a hole in the bund; the water did the rest, in a few minutes making a fathom-wide breach and pouring out to flood an old channel. A mere drainage ditch—India has thousands such—the stream was one that filled in a few hours, and in a few hours fell again to a flow of a foot or less. It had fallen in the forty minutes since Nicky crossed it, and with this new diversion fell further. When Kitty came up, it was possible, with the syce wading alongside and Nicky on the other flank, to fetch Ladybird over. Stolder than Diamond, she was harder to

coax when frightened; but the compulsion of three human wills, and most of all the presence of Nicky, looming above her and above those brawling waters—Nicky, soothing but inexorable; whose tones, sharpened by anxiety and awareness of her own horse tumultuous beneath her, struck resistless as steel—pushed her across. Followed, after Nicky's firm hands had helped her father to a seat beside Kitty, an exciting episode of return; the helpless man declared that it added a century to his age to see the yellow swirl below, "and my baby swimming on a fractious sea-beast." But they got over; and Nicky kept by the trap till it was clear that Ladybird, headed for home, would make no trouble at the lesser hindrances of the journey.

II

The sun confronted them, absurdly perched on Trisul's central finger—a nursery picture, straddling Humpty-Dumpty! The rock was smitten silver, the wilderness pow-

dered and sprinkled with points of light. And Nicky was fire and air, to the tingling tips of existence. Health was racing in her veins, and fear and distress—like the brook she had crossed—had but to decline from their height to fall away rapidly. She smiled happily at her father. These absurd shoes in which she had come out—now dripping rags from the bund that she had pierced! Even Kitty smiled, as Nicky, gleefully rueful, drew attention to her shoes and frock.

The universe was waves, her body—an impish, elemental thing—their rider. Buoyancy of beast and flood had served its reckless gaiety; her heart *bounded* in her, her foot played restlessly with the stirrup. As she swung it back impetuously, she caught Diamond's look—a subjugated flame, subdued and smouldering in appeal. And depressed her heel in the nick of time, troubled by a poignant sympathy—sorrow that she had made of this spirit a machine. He knew her moods and trembled with them. Swift-ness of the turning world, stir of its leaves and shaken airs—these had touched him, too.

And she had been so aloof and vexing, a chill, poised tyranny with eyes elsewhere from Ariell! To her father's anxious sight they had "flamed amazement," dashing through the turbid waters; but her comrade in that venture might have been a raft, for all the thought she spared him then. "Yes," she said aloud. "Why *should* we wait for these people with a cart and wheels to drag? You're a wild thing like myself, Diamond; and *I* should feel seditious in your place. And we have to get everything ready for Dad." She half freed him, so that they danced ahead and would not spatter the trap—she delayed to complete a swerve past a corner, so that Ladybird would not be pricked with the madness of their going—she settled herself in the saddle, simply that she might *feel* how luxuriously alive she was. Then heel and voice gave the release. "Get on, sir!" The trap's passengers, rounding the curve, saw her already far ahead.

"There's Nicky gone crazy again!" said Kitty. "She'll break her neck one of these days."

"Not on Diamond," said her father. "They know each other too well. And her eyes are peeled. And she knows every inch of the country."

He saw the pace slacken—they had reached broken ground. Knowledge and instinct—Nicky's instinct, no less than the brute's—were in fellowship, flyingly rejecting this take-off as crumbling, that landing as too hard. It seemed to be Nicky herself who was springing swiftly here, momentarily pausing there. To himself he thought, "She's a magnificent animal!" She was—delicate-limbed and slight, with the desert quickness and slender, racing poise of the gazelle. Kitty—for a young woman who attracted, and returned, so much admiration—was, after all, a creature reasonably fresh and unspoiled. But Nicky was that infinitely more virgin being, a girl so plunged in utter ecstasy of living and dreaming and action that she had never given a thought to sex. If social ethics had permitted such a thing and opportunity had come, she would have rambled through a moonlit night of spring

with a man that she liked, and never have bothered as to what she was doing. The chances are, too, that she would have found a man who would have understood her mood sufficiently to have taken her comradeship as a rare and lovely thing, too exquisite to be marred by love-making. For sex can be not only the flower, but the flower's protection—a bloom on the limbs of maidenhood, so radiant that for its own sake the beholder will not touch it.

Almost staggered by the grossness of his thought, to reassure himself Lyon repeated it. "A magnificent animal—as perfect as any leopard or deer or horse!" He added, "And she waited up all night for me! And then raced here before the dark had finished!"

CHAPTER III

I

BUT it was a sober enough girl who prepared for her father's home-coming. She had seen, in the physical surrender when he was once safely beside Kitty, how pain and weariness gripped him. There was no doctor nearer than Khatra, seventy miles away. Nicky would have faced the journey, but knew it was useless; you did not often, or easily, get Duncan Macarthy far from the purlieus of the Khatra Club. He liked his whist and whisky, and was a poor horseman. He would have been staggered by the suggestion that he should cross a country furrowed with countless hurrying water-courses. In any case, to fetch him would leave the bones unset for a week. Her father in pain all that time!

A long illness, even with the bones again in place, was going to be a hard fight, with

no aid but the presence of two girls. Kitty would be fuming, and throwing over them all the cloud of her unhappiness. Even if Nicky could endure it—as she supposed she could—her father could not. Kitty's moods drove him to frenzy, and he her to a deeper rebelliousness. Nicky resolved to get Kitty away; and in the resolution knew that part of her difficulties were gone, and felt lighter.

"Nicolette, my dear," she said, "you've got to make bricks without straw. If you'd lived in London, now—why, you'd have had a better thinking machine!"

She had to go to a stores cupboard on the back veranda. As she did, she saw Hari Singh. Hari Singh was a person whose status in her father's economy was uncertain; but there was no uncertainty about his value. No one knew anything about his original home or family, and it was doubtful if he had any right to an appellation so honourable as Singh. However, he was in the zemindari employ—mainly, said John Lyon, because he had need of a competent thief. The custom was of long standing, to tell Hari Singh if any

small article were wanted; it invariably appeared. Nicky, recently, had seen, looking over the garden, that she wanted a *togor*, the camellia whose dazzling white flowers are whorled into the neatest head of beauty that the world possesses; she had mentioned her lack to Hari Singh, and next morning he had brought her half a dozen shrubs. Now, the nearest garden where *togor* grew was the Raja of Khalasi's, seven miles away, and he was a friend of neither her father nor his Company. But if Nicky had wanted a whole forest of *togors*—or a basket of cobras—or anything else—Hari Singh would have found a way of serving her.

"Bone-headed creature that you are," Nicky told herself, "if Hari Singh can produce at five minutes' notice nails of an impossible size or a couple of lanterns more than we possess—or any other blessed thing, Miss Nicolette"—it was her custom to hold argument with herself, whenever a way opened out of a trouble that had seemed insoluble—"then he can produce someone to fix Dad."

She told her perplexity, wasting no word

on the night's mishaps—narration, she knew, was superfluous.

Hari Singh said only, "*Ishton Sabeber Syce*" ("Stone Saheb's Syce").

Antony Stone was their nearest neighbour, an indigo-planter ten miles away. Nicky had used his syce's skill more than once; this summer her best cow had been his patient, for a broken leg.

Her father heard her peal of laughter with a sick man's resentment. "She seems damned cheery, with me laid up here and no doctor within a good seventy miles!" Recalling what she had done, he was ashamed of his petulance.

2

She ordered breakfast at once, and walked across to the grove where the horses sheltered from the day—a mango enclave swelling up like a green island in the sal-forest surf. Here were Ladybird and Fanny; here was Diamond, cooled and left in blissful shade this hour since. She watched with a

contentment equal to his, the slow, comfortable swishes of his tail; then was vexed, not for her own sake but for his, that he should be so soon returned to duty.

"What should we do without each other?" she asked him. "If I went—do you think Kitty would take you over? *Kitty!* who rides because we haven't a railway—or because some young man has the good taste to want to admire her and to tell her what a darling she looks! As she is," she added softly; for she knew that forest wanderings and lonely hours were poor fare for a girl of twenty, whose beauty cried out to be reflected in eyes that beheld it, before it had passed for ever. "No. You'd be too much for Kitty; and Dad prefers Fanny. You'd have to be sold, Diamond. 'Waler, 15.1 hands, 6 years, handsome, fast, ridden by a lady.' It's alluring enough. And every word *true*. You'd be bought by someone who'd have the funk of her life the first time you took her out, before you knew her and when you were fresh and fretting for your old mistress. And she'd have no more sense"

—she grew indignant with the foolish, unknown lady—“than to try to get rid of my Diamond, or to have him broken to carriage work—just as if he were Ladybird or Captain! And Dad would have a rancorous correspondence on his hands, saying it was just the sort of trick a zemindari wallah *would* do!”

Returning to the house, she noted that a shower was due to burst. It would rain at intervals, and she would travel in a baking mist of moisture from the saturated earth and her own damp clothes.

Then she searched for a jest to cheer the father she was leaving. Life clamoured for vivacity; and at times she wearied, when she knew her body and spirit far from the mood. But words that to her were dull and teasing flashed when she spoke them; her father's eyes grew restful as he saw her standing by him. Gallant, resolute, decided—his mind, plucking up words like flowers, flung them all by, as too faded for that form and carriage. Only, all that he had never seen—the boyish grace of the son who had died in

being born—the courage that should have stood beside him now, when his own strength was failing so surely—this was present in his sick-room, and he was comforted.

“Hear the punishment of pride and obstinacy,” she said. “Mr. John Carmichael Lyon is going to be set right by a cow-doctor. I’m off, as soon as I’ve had breakfast, to borrow Ibrahim Syce.”

He pleaded with her to let the matter wait till to-morrow. “I can *feel* the kind of day it’s going to be. Hot as Hades. And ten before you start.”

“It’s gone ten already.”

“I’d have let the whole zemindari go hang, and fifty villages cut each others’ throats,” he groaned.

“But—I shall *love* it.” And at the moment she did not doubt this.

She left the room, to reappear with the relics of her morning’s escapade. “Do you think, sir,” she asked him, “that any girl minds getting out in that perfectly *heavenly* first hour—when it means a new dress and

shoes? *Now* you understand—oh, the relief of shedding the burden of gratitude that's been so oppressing him, poor man! *Of course!* Nicolette rode so attired, merely to make an excuse for a shopping trip presently!"

"Dear," she added, "I promise to go at funeral pace."

3

But Diamond arched a mutinous back, and progress to the road was semi-circular, with fanlike spatter of the gravel. Magnificently negligent, she laughed at him; and he took her unawares where the servants had an unauthorised cut across the cactus hedge, beneath a tree. Her duck was quick but insufficient; a branch caught her helmet, wrenching her neck. Hurlled almost from the saddle, her weight hung on Diamond's mouth. He reared upright, then flung her into the bough's recoil—into a network of lithe, lashing twigs—vicious, stinging points of pain. Her hands flew up to her face, he went on released, she struck the ground with a

thud. Even in fury she was artist enough to admire the carriage of head and heels, as he cantered to rejoin his friends. Sense of fairness told her also—and would tell her again more loudly, when she had calmness to assess the affair and be amused at herself—that she had herself to blame, for having winked at the use of the gap.

She was smarting and tempestuous now, however, and conscious of her person disarrayed and of unprecedented humiliation, which servants would talk of as long as they lived. She was dourly diverted by her sudden vision of herself glowering as they rushed about her—to reclaim the fugitive, to pick her whip up, to be uselessly officious in the alarm and dread of guilt to be presently discovered—the natural “reaction” when humbleness has been unlucky enough to see greatness come a cropper. In some unsuspected way, they were sure, they would find that this disaster was their deed—a goddess does not tumble to earth except when an age of exceeding sin has involved mankind. Their foreboding was justified to this extent,

that they were told, succinctly and frankly, what the Miss Saheb thought of the gap and its use. It was to be railed across immediately—and let no one be so hardy as to use it again or to make another! No one would; henceforward lazy turpitude would find some other expression. Further, no word of her mishap was to reach her father.

Remounted, she recalled Diamond to his obedience, with amazement and still flaming wrath. "You are free to think me"—she put him back to the orthodox gate—"both inconsiderate and crazy. But—you—are going to *get on*, sir!" Arrived at the gap again, he showed that he remembered it; trembling with indignation, she convinced him that she did also, and hustled him by. "I never heard of such a countrybred's trick."

So her will to journey quietly was frustrate, and matters ignored in the morning's madness were made too plain. She had ridden out at dawn practically naked-kneed against the crutch; this sideways plunge and tussle had rubbed the rawness to agony. Still, sanely dressed, she could watch this; it was

merely the last reminder that no inch of her body seemed free from ache or smart. Other things were harder to endure. The fight had frayed her temper, and her brain hinted that the limits of physical endurance could not be far off. (Ordinarily, she would not have ridden for another day.) In an access of faintness she was terrified by the tightly strung power she was holding in against itself; Diamond bounded along, while her eyes were a blur and she handled the reins as in a sick dream. Reviving, in a breakdown of passionate vexation she communicated more than displeasure, she passed on her fright. The reply was a wild plunge out of hand. But this was her only mistake, appalling because it threw a flash upon the state of her own mind, and showed how low were her reserves. A cork-screw twisting of the path amid rocks assisted recovery; but Diamond flung his head up, and she was aware of the tremendous surge of rebellious haunches as she pulled him in. A raft must feel so, when the underswell gathers to toss it to a crest of storm. She knew now at what

a drain she had gone through the events of the night and the dawning. She was accustomed to assume that she overruled the circumstances of her life by sheer superiority. "Miss Nicolette's as hard as nails," she used to assure herself. It was not true. Her blood was clean, her body knit into slender, sweet perfection. But it was a lily for delicacy and frailty, and this was a man's life into which it had been thrown. She had ruled that life, with all its demands—for mental alertness, for swift, decisive action, for patience with her father's moods and Kitty's fretfulness and the servants' trivial sins and not so trivial stupidities—by the constant exercise of nervous energy and courageous gaiety. Valour has found strange sheaths; but rarely a slighter than this lady's wildflower loveliness. Its steel had glimmered out tempestuously, a lightning now flashing back in fiery opposition to itself. She felt the rush of tears. She swept them aside impatiently, and resumed command of herself and Diamond. "Fool that I am! to think that I can boss everyone around me, when I can govern

only by consent! Right, old Radical! I give you your treaty. I promise to keep my temper. But you must chuck your notion that this is a dancing-floor!"

Her body streamed from head to foot, and she felt gasps of dryness in her throat. The horse's flanks had changed colour—no longer a glossy black, they were one curtain of grey, pouring sweat. He had got them both into a most unnecessary heat, and even through gloves her reins were slippery. Luckily, twenty minutes of shower came to cool them, and gave excuse to shelter in a grove. Yesterday she would have felt how wonderful was the spectacle—the sudden cowering of the trees, shrinking from the buffets to come—the sidling of beasts and birds to cover—then the roar and race of the rain tearing up the mud. But now—what had happened? She found herself no longer steeping her spirit in the sharp touch and wide-sweeping prospect of the storm. She was wondering if her life were sufficient—if it were good enough that her father, in the grip of illness continually, should give herself and Kitty as

hostages to chance and take risks that brought him back to be a burden on two girls who were alone. Was it good enough that there should be only this one life as a plank between them and a situation that, to say the least, would be disquieting and perilous? Good enough that she should be at the mercy of a burning day and a silly brute, with no defence but courage and aching muscles? She felt impatience with her father, and even—not contempt, certainly not that, but—a passing sympathy with Kitty's occasional contempt for him. It was all very well for a man to pride himself on being strong and independent—"I don't care a damn what anyone thinks," was his favourite boast—but there must be limits to his right to sacrifice his children to his chosen way of life. Her sense of fairness reminded her that she showed herself his daughter by her secret brag, "Miss Nicolette's as hard as nails." Miss Nicolette wasn't. She was a not far from exhausted girl, and fifteen minutes ago had been close to being a timid and hysterical one. Oh, no! that was nonsense; any-

way, exaggeration. She had merely lost her temper for a moment, confronted by weariness looming up before her, like the unfathomable gulf of a Himalayan mist. But it had been a reasonably tight corner. Only because her mind had worn the body out. That was all; she was tired, and troubled for her father. Even so—it had been upsetting. What if the servants knew that she could feel fear? Or the tenants on her father's section of the zemindari? For with them, too, there were times when she had to take the high, imperious line—times when she visited a village for him, because he was down with more than his usual malaria, or when they were out together and divided the work, that the whole business might be got through the quicker. With all these—she heard what they had to say, they knew she was scrupulously fair, and that she understood them and all about them—but then she said what ought to be done, and they did it. None of them had ever dreamed that she could be afraid; or weak, like one of their own women.

It was noon when she entered Mr. Stone's compound. Victor, the eldest son, was lounging on the front veranda, bare feet parked against the rails; he was still in pyjamas. She saw him, and deliberately wheeled away to the other side of the house; her look of involuntary disgust stung him—he had never before thought there was anything indelicate in spending a hot day in his garb of the night before. And if a lady accidentally saw him—why, it was rather a lark. But that glance of unseeing disdain was an unpleasant experience; and he did what he would not have done for his own sisters, he slunk indoors to dress. He stole another glimpse at her waiting at the turn of the house; patience and weariness gave her face a touching dignity. Her voice had a break in it, as she called "*Qwy hai?*" ("Anyone there?"). He did nothing, for pleasure of hearing it again; then he stepped across to his eldest sister's room, and roused her through the curtain. Angelina threw a shawl over her

half-clad shoulders, and came out. "Vy, Miss Nicky! Good gracious, to see you here! My, but it is *so* hot! How can you be so energetic?"

She shouted back to the house. "Clarissel Helen! Daisy! Here's Nicky Lyon! Oh, Mangall"—to a gardener, about to go home. Mangal was caught, and told to take the horse to the stables. In another ten minutes the whole tide of the Stone girls—"a regular stone age," Nicky reported afterwards to her father, "a sea of flints chipping at me with questions and exclamations"—was billowing round her. Nicky was a much admired visitor at their house, and an infrequent one. It was the fashion to speak of her as "that child," Kitty only being allowed to be grown up. But on the rare occasions of her coming she had made her impression.

Antony Stone—"Tony Stony" or "Stony Tony," as he was called in clubs and places where wits congregate—early in his career had married a pretty Eurasian girl. Thyrza Derozio had long since shed the last vestiges of her looks and graceful figure, and was a

shapeless woman who appeared decades older than her husband. She had never attained—or attempted—to understand anything above the household details of his life; she lived her own apart, one of illusions. She had passed on her beauty to her daughters, every one of whom had dark, melting eyes and a certain appealing frailty of expression. But the charm of the two elder ended here; they had no distinction of outline, they struck the beholder as sliding cloud-masses, with glowing sparks where consciousness lived. Indian sweets are drippingly saccharine, and the munching of them at all hours does not conduce to slimness of figure. Daisy, the youngest Miss Stone, still kept a rosy plumpness that only a critical mind would consider excessive. She, and tall, alert Helen, the third sister, were the only ones that took any exercise. Helen was much the sensiblest and quietest of the four. Their ages spaced themselves out pretty evenly between sixteen and twenty. Brother Victor was twenty-two, another brother would have been twenty-one had he lived. Two younger

boys, aged twelve and ten, had come in as a sort of after-thought, when the family seemed completed. I am not sure that it will be necessary for the reader to get to know every one of the Stones intimately.

"Goodness gracious, Nicky!" "Vy, my dear, it's *ages* since we saw you!" "My word, girl, but *you* are *hot!*" "You mean to say that you rode over from Trisulbaril!" "Goodness, Nicky!" "What on earth has brought you here, Nicky?"

And so on. And so on. And so on. For fifteen minutes.

Mr. Victor Stone appeared, having got himself up with careful though hurried elegance. His handkerchief was soaked with scent. Nicky, recoiling, longed for evening, when the rain-freshened forest would be about her, space to breathe in and airs fit to breathe. He had even shaved. Now he answered Angelina's question—the last in our sample packet just now—a question recurrent like a decimal, and due to turn up just as he entered. He spoke with courtly, humorous gallantry.

"Miss Nicky has come over to partner her slave in a game of whist this evening."

"You are a *vicked* boy!" said Clarisse, and giggled as she pushed him. "He is always making his jokes, Nicky. You must not mind him."

Victor felt he had paid a compliment very happily. One talks to little girls so—and Nicky was only a little girl, although an exceptionally lovely one. He had seen a figure to-day that he could not forget—unbowed by weariness, too contemptuous of weakness to acknowledge it even by a gesture when alone.

Nicky's shoulder turned away, and her cheeks flushed. Helen rose, and went to her. "My dear, you're done up. And we've been letting you sit here in wet things, while we chattered like squirrels! You're going to bathe and change at once into things of mine, and spend the night here."

They had not let her get in a word yet; and she was waiting, too worn for battle with their tides of speech, until they were ready. She got up now, with a look of gratitude and affection for Helen.

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"Have a peg," said Victor waggishly. "A stiff one, with not too much soda."

"I can't spend the night," Nicky told Helen, "I must get back to father." She explained why. "So I want to borrow Ibrahim Syce, if Mr. Stone will be so good."

"Vy, of *course*," said Angelina. "But Dad's out. He's showing a visitor round—a young man called Rivers."

"Nicky," said Helen, "before you do or say another thing, you're coming into my room to change."

"I wish I could oblige by offering things of mine," said Victor, "but——" He went ashen white before Nicky's face, and realised the disadvantages of a ready wit that throws out coin of humour without testing if it be true silver.

While she was changing Nicky heard steps that were plainly Mr. Stone's; followed the confused tumult that blares about a chieftain's return. He had flung himself into a capacious chair, and bellowed "*Quy hai?*" Nicky heard a rush of bare feet, and laughed as she visualised what was happening. Mr.

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Stone swung his legs up; a kneeling servant seized each, and tugged off his boots—a third ran up with table and tray containing glasses and bottles of whisky and of soda—a fourth hurried to the punkah-rope on the veranda.

After Mr. Stone had comforted himself, he spoke. "I left young Rivers looking at our tank. He wants to know if it can be made any good for fishing, if you clear the lotuses out. I told him to come on when he'd finished his investigations. I was just about done, after tramping about for a couple of hours. This drink's saved my life." He poured himself out a second peg—or, rather, indicated to the waiting bearer that he wished this to be done.

It was not permissible to interrupt Mr. Stone until he had at least begun to refresh himself. But now three voices spoke at once.

"Nicky Lyon's here." "Good gracious, Daddy, do you know she's ridden over in this heat?" "Mr. Lyon had a fall and has broken his arm and collarbone." "No, his wrist and collarbone." "Nicky wants to take

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Ibrahim back to set them." "She says she's going back this evening."

Behind the curtains of Helen's room, Nicky asked, "Who is Mr. Rivers?"

Helen shrugged her shoulders. "He's in the Army. And can't forget it."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Oh, no. But he thinks of buying our place here."

"You're not going, my dear! You're the one person I care about, for miles and miles round."

"You don't give us much of your company, Nicky. Only when your Dad or a cow gets hurt. And then it's our syce you want to see, not us!"

"I'm sorry, Helen. If you knew how I funk a lot of people!"

"Oh, well, you won't lose us yet awhile. Mr. Rivers is a rather spoilt young person who fancies trying a little work for a change. And his notion was that, now that synthetic dye is hitting us so badly, was the time to pick a plantation up cheap and turn money over quickly. But he's already found that

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there's more work in indigo-planting than suits His Highness. And Dad has no intention of *giving* his place away."

So the boy had been rude to Helen—his manner had showed that he thought them beneath him. He would think that of her, too—and her father had been in a regiment with fifty times the name of his! Helen was too good for a thousand of his sort. Nicky reflected on Mr. Rivers with some indignation.

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Helen's report perhaps unjustly prejudiced Nicky against the visitor. A presentable young man of twenty-two who finds himself alone in a family of girls is likely to have a good time. Norman Rivers had no objection to this. But he found the Stone family overpowering; he stayed out long after his host had gone in, partly to avoid having to reply to a continual volley of "Oh, Mr. Rivers" and "Don't you think, Mr. Rivers?" Then he had slipped back, to find a grey-hapt

wood-goddess—she was wearing a soft-hued frock of Helen's, that went well with her present looks—telling a tale of tumbling torrents and of forests ablaze with the fires of dawn. As she said, "It was a most amusing job getting Ladybird across, but Kitty and I managed it," there was quick explosion in the flame that leapt in those wide eyes. "Kitty was a passenger on that trip," he decided. The grey dress faded into insufficiency; she needed the green habit of a huntress, with clashing spear and buskined steps.

Mr. Stone was all complaisance. "You shall have Ibrahim, my dear. And I think you're a damned plucky kid." The colour touched her cheeks, a tiny twist of her lips—half recoil, half amusement—accompanied the change. Her amusement died, as she relaxed into a chair. (She had risen in the excitement of her story.) In a moment she seemed a thousand miles away. Into her face came that look which of all that can pass over a beautiful woman's features is the most moving of all, to the man who catches sight of it, himself unseen. She looked weary and

defeated; and her tiny hands, that had been so vivacious, lay open and idle along her chair's sides.

From now on until breakfast—and during breakfast—Nicky was mostly silent. She interviewed Ibrahim Syce, who promised to go to Trisulbari. On her return she was listless in her chair again. Norman said something to her, which she hardly heard; she answered, at the second time of speaking, with an unheeding courtesy that all of a sudden (he felt) hardened into hostility. But she had noticed him, which when she began to reply to him she had not done.

The others made up for her silence. The Stones plumed themselves on the cheery character of their life. The girls surrounded Norman, intent on his happiness; he listened, as a Bengal tiger in its cage may be supposed to listen to a Bank Holiday crowd. Maddened and distracted, from time to time he threw across a glance to Miss Lyon, but she sat unregarding. She was not at peace, however, for Victor Stone, unable to keep away from the flame that had singed him, conquered

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chagrin and attached himself to her. But Norman need not have felt jealousy, for she snubbed her admirer until even he took the hint and pulled his chair away. He sulked thereafter. "Proud little devill and her father thinks himself too good to mix with us, except when he wants to borrow our servants." But it was not the girls alone who made the Stones' bungalow a place delightful to those who like "a good time." There were flocks of dogs, who for the most part lived indoors. They lay about on chairs and sofas, they gobbled their fleas, the younger ones fought and romped. From time to time one of them chose to give an alarm, whereupon the whole pack gave rowdy tongue and swept through the house like a train of hellhounds. You never knew when one would set up an ear-splitting yelp, and the rest of the hunt tumble down from cushion and couch, and stream off as if possessed. To Nicky they were an especial nightmare. It did not improve your appetite when with the Stones, to remember that part of the herd slept in the cook's special storeroom, where

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much of the food was kept. One glimpse of this kennel, the only one they had, helped you to understand why many otherwise normal people prefer the cat as a pet. But, as her father observed, once people get "dippy" about dogs, the daintiest of them lose all sense of decency or cleanliness where their pets are concerned. The whole air was scented with dog, for their incessant playfulness kept them warm.

She was counting the hours till evening, when she could escape. Yet once, at a particularly uncalled-for outbreak, she was amused by the absurdity of it all, and thought she would count the dogs and find out how many the Stones really had. A hasty reckoning showed seven flowing past; but tributaries were trickling in from side-rooms and corners, to swell the main stream. Looking up, she saw Rivers' vexation, and could not help smiling. He smiled back eagerly. Annoyed with herself, she turned indifferently away.

He was wounded, and began to chatter wildly of regimental and hill station life, a

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life that to his auditors seemed a round of splendour. Nicky knew the story well, from her father's talk. She sat aloof with Helen, to whom she made a low sarcastic comment. Watching the boy and his admirers, she had the proof that sex can be responsible for more insipid silliness than any other thing. She knew the brag was for her benefit, and that something had awakened this young man to the belief that she was a charming woman, whose smiles were worth the winning. But he was just an awkward, self-conscious boy trying to wrap his stupidity up. Then she looked at his audience, and half forgave him. The human drama certainly was a comic spectacle! Norman saw her face dimple with an amusement she could not check. He was hurt, and called out something to her, in the attempt to bring her into the conversation. She appeared not to have heard, for she rose just then and walked to a veranda—and was in time to see a servant rescuing a leg of mutton from two dogs. Norman saw the struggle in her countenance when she returned—the laughter that was escaping from

control, to be demurely smoothed down again. She had made the note, "Avoid the cold meat." But he was quiet with suspicion of himself as amusement's cause. He was fast becoming a scholar in the changing moods of one face.

Mrs. Stone appeared at breakfast—to-day a meal exceptionally late, even for the Stones' household. But Norman's presence had disorganised things. Mrs. Stone was vaguely worried—her usual condition. It was explained to her that Helen had lent the guest clothes, because Nicky's were drenched. Victor managed to get in a roguish allusion to the garb in which the visitor had nearly caught him. "He is *such* a very *naughty* boy," cried Angelina. "He spends the whole *day* in his pyjamas, and even comes to breakfast in them. And *ve* sisters speak to him about it! But he takes *no* notice."

Mrs. Stone's perplexed mind connected Victor's scanty attire and Nicky's wetting as due to the same cause—she herself was an excessively fat woman, suffering terribly in the steaming rains. "Ah!" she sighed. "It's

so 'orribly 'ot and 'umid." She had somewhere and somehow (amazingly enough) picked up a cockney habit of dropping her aitches. This must not be taken as part of her racial dower, but as a differentia personal to herself. Perhaps its origin should be sought in barracks, in the days before her beauty passed its meridian.

There was no arrangement at the Stones'; and Norman, who should have been next his hostess, slipped into the place beside Nicky. His neighbour had no wish for a triumph over the ladies of the house, and was vexed at a preference so openly, and with some rudeness, displayed. She talked to Mr. Stone, whom she easily entangled in an interminable story, so ramblingly told that it was without pauses where a third person could interrupt.

But Helen took pity on Norman. "Did you approve of the tank, Mr. Rivers?"

"Oh, quite a jolly little place. But no good for fishing, unless you cleared out that lotus-jungle."

The impiety drew Nicky, who turned her

head. "They are *red* lotuses," she said. "Are you aware that there isn't another tank with such a *magnificent* show of red lotuses, nearer than Trisulbari—my father's place?" She looked at him as if he had proposed to chip a souvenir off the Parthenon.

"They should not go then, Miss Lyon, since you plead for them—if the place were mine."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, don't keep them for *our* sake. If you don't care for beauty for its own sake—or for your sake—by all means off with its head!"

He said quietly, "If you put it that way, I suppose it *is* a bit steep. But I never saw anything queer in it—before."

By condescending to snub him she had perforce shed the worst of her hauteur. Catching his gaze full, in its frank admiration she was disconcerted—a moth in sudden dazzle. She swung out of the glare, embarrassed to have been drawn into this unwelcome intimacy of rebuke and apology.

Moreover, she was vexed that they had attracted Victor's interest. He shouted,

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"What's Miss Nicky scolding you about, Rivers? Tell us. Ve'll take your part."

But Rivers scored his second point. He said quickly to Angelina, "You are interested in flowers, Miss Stone? Your father tells me you are the real gardener here. Now, my bearer was telling me something about a blue lotus. Is there such a flower?"

"Blue hell!" said Mr. Stone Senior, making a face of distaste. "How long before breakfast was this beer opened?" Mr. Stone was old-fashioned enough to disapprove of tea and coffee.

An intruding spate of servants followed his bellow. The dogs took up the excitement, and five minutes' pandemonium enveloped the gesticulations with which Mr. Stone pushed home the great drink question, receiving answers which he considered unsatisfactory. The servant who was proved to have brought in the beer was fined a rupee.

In this, and similar pleasant fashion, breakfast ran its course. The party dispersed to drowse till four, when there would be a cup of tea before Nicky returned. Ibrahim Syce

was to ride on slowly, starting an hour before she did.

At four Nicky was out while the others were still on beds. All but Norman, who was resting in a long chair on the veranda. He saw what he had watched for; she knew, but was indifferent. She strode across to the other corner—back in her own habit and tall boots she assumed a rakish, boyish air—not for beholders, but for pleasure of her own metamorphosis, with all the woodland memories that it brought. As though Titania had turned swashbuckler! She was already in thought escaped from this rowdy house and its stagnant airs, and was watching evening close down on the rain-fragrant forest.

He went up to her. "Miss Lyon!"

"Yes?" She confronted him. Her brow puckered, as she adjusted the chin-strap of her helmet, twisting her fingers through it.

"You are frowning!"

The liar! As if that sweet perplexity, the shadow of the mind revolving its course to come, could be called a frown!

She laughed. "Am I? It must be from

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pulling on these boots. They go damnable hard, like the lock of Doubting Castle, especially when I'm the least bit fagged."

The word was his cue. His robe of sophistication long since off his shoulders, he was a pleading, wondering boy.

"I say, Miss Lyon—"

Her eyes were wary, but not unfriendly. He blurted out, "I think you're the pluckiest kid I ever met."

"You've heard that said already in this house," she pointed out with some severity. "If you must repeat, why not say 'girl?'"

He apologised. "But what I want to say is—you're not going back *alone*?"

"I am." The frown was genuine now. "Do you imagine me pining for Mr. Victor Stone's escort?"

"I want you to take mine."

"You'd make yourself conspicuous. Think of this houseful of girls!"

"I don't care."

"You'd make *me* conspicuous. I think I *should* care."

"I won't do that."

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Face to face they stood, unspeaking. "No," she said at last. "I've done this sort of thing all my life. Besides—"

"Besides what, Miss Lyon?"

"Oh, never mind," she said with weary petulance. "Never mind, Mr. Rivers. I'm obliged to you. But I'm *not* going to have you with me. I'm afraid that must serve."

She drew his attention to Mrs. Stone toiling in, followed by servants carrying pots.

"Good gracious! Hasn't she been resting?"

"She never rests at this time. She is sure her servants mean to poison her drinking-water. She won't draw it from the well, but goes down to the river-bed, a good five hundred yards away, and has a hole dug in the sand. She goes in the afternoon by preference, because fewer folk are out of doors. Where all are potential poisoners, the fewer about the better, you see. Then she boils the water herself, and keeps it by her under lock and key. She has a busy life, has Mrs. Stone."

"I should think she has! Fancy dragging down at this hour!"

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"She has a man brought from Calcutta specially every six months, to test the locks she keeps upon her precious water."

"But what about old Stone? Doesn't *he* worry about his water being poisoned? She doesn't supply the whole household, surely?"

"I don't think he takes a lot of it."

"I'm dead sure he doesn't," said Norman with conviction.

"And what he wants he takes as and where he finds it. I fancy Mr. Stone feels that whisky is a poison-neutraliser, and would make even tank-water safe."

(A servant told them tea was ready.)

"Miss Lyon, really! I'll come straight back, once I know you're safe."

"To a houseful of girls whom you have forsaken! They haven't seen a young man for months—except Brother Victor."

"Yes, hang it! I know. It's like a Calcutta babu's house—one of those places where the old man seems to have done nothing all his life but collect women! You trip over them wherever you turn. The sweetmeat expenditure of this establishment must be

something enormous. No wonder old Stone feels he has to sell out."

"Upon my word, sir!" She stepped back, and pretended to frown. But his grin disarmed the effort—why had Helen thought him affected and conceited? "You are reasonably saucy to one of these women whom your host has—temporarily—*collected*. After that, we'd better go in to tea."

"Miss Lyon—"

"Make the best of your chances here," she counselled him over her shoulder. "Let me recommend Helen. She's a dear. If I were a man, I should fall in love with Helen."

"Miss Lyon," he began again.

"No, Mr. Rivers. No! That's final. But when I go you can test my girths and hand me up—if you manage to forestall Mr. Victor Stone. In fact, I shall thank you if you manage that."

An hour later, he was getting his last glimpse of her. She had reined in for Antony

Stone's shouted message of farewell. Her gloved fist was resting on Diamond's back behind the saddle, rigid to her shoulder; her face was turned, all grace and listening courtesy. The lady's flag was high. Not in the droop of a muscle was there anything to suggest that in the last twenty-four hours had been storms of fear and anxiety shaking the brain—that only transient and troubled sleep had prepared the body for the exertions of the day.

He had reason, had he known, to be pleased with himself. He had done his devoirs adroitly; he had guessed that, if he was to please her, he must take charge, not merely with efficiency, but with ease and unobtrusiveness. She was not going to be a symbol of war between two men. Victor Stone hardly realised what was happening, before he saw Miss Lyon mounted and smiling her thanks. There had been collusion—she had caught the sound of hoofs and glanced at Rivers, at the same time continuing, with back to her approaching horse, to chatter gaily to the girls. She had turned

quickly, and her cavalier had been ready. But it had all been quiet and natural. It had not made her "conspicuous."

She was content to loiter, going homeward. That moment of faintness when she had seen the world swimming into mist about her—though she had emerged, its horror remained. She had been glad to exchange jests with a boy she had meant to snub, and to feel his strength and neatness assisting her. It had all been very cosy, in that awful house of the Stones, to have someone you could share amusement with. What was this—that she, Nicky Lyon, should be insufficient? Should be conscious of it—and almost willing to cry for help! If she *were* insufficient, Heaven help her, for there was no one in her home who could! It was she to whom all the others looked. "Miss Nicolette's as hard as nails." Miss Nicolette had been near to tears to-day—and all because of a few hours' worry!

So she surrendered herself to things outside herself, glad to cease to be a fevered, active mind and hands, and just to let

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sensation flood her. The mind reclined on a couch, eye and ear its ministers. Day was darkening prematurely, with massing of clouds; but she knew from the stillness—cool, not warm—that no rain to bother about would fall before she was home. The effect was to contract the universe to a narrow room, in which she was alone, with gloomy curtains every way. Within that room no rain could come; since she was taking it with her, she was safe to the end. It was like an immense umbrella overhead.

An umbrella—she remembered seeing a lady riding to church at Ranikhet, when a shower had begun; she had opened an umbrella, to the alarm of her mount, and had spilled a lot of visiting cards all over the road. Nicky had picked up her Prayer Book for her, but the lady had been too vexed or else too flurried even to thank her. Nicky was then a girl of ten. She remembered staring indignantly after the mannerless lady.

As the gates of Trisulbari came in sight, the clouds split apart, and a blood-red glory showed. It had sufficient for itself and to

spare; it gave pink tips to trees and bushes and a glow to marshy places. At an impulse the jungle was astir, and its leaves were dancing; one solitary twig, uplifted close to Nicky, was bobbing wildly—for no perceptible reason, unless plants, like ourselves, can be afflicted by lunacy—bobbing faster by far than any other of its excited companions. She remembered the lady novelist's description of her hero's prowess for Oxford against the other university. What was his name? Nicky decided that it was Pierre. "*All* rowed a fast stroke—but Pierre *twice as fast* as anyone else." Pierre was admonished with a flick as she went by. "You'll upset the boat if you don't steady on, Pierre. I wouldn't be in your shoes when the other boys get at you afterwards." Leaning back, her countenance one happy beauty, she frowned; the zealot seemed to pause, and perked a Puck-like ear. Instantly the whole forest was with him, her audience; the elves were out, sitting at the roots of every bush. It was the sudden half-veiling of the sun, that had suffused all with a soft golden light, as

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though the air were sown with insubstantial glow-worms. And Nicky, facing the fountain of this heavenly radiance, found herself crying. No reason for it—none whatever. Only, it had been a good day—and it was going, as good days must.

7

Twenty minutes later, she was marvelling at the skill with which fingers gentler than a woman's were setting her father's shoulder. But it was a sterner business to pull into place the fractured ends at the wrist. Watching the process, she assured herself that it was one beyond a woman's strength. It inflicted cruel suffering; and, gazing in her father's dear face, she saw it as a room where pride, the master, had commanded fear and pain to hide themselves. With no change of countenance, he directed matters coldly. At the worst moment of the ordeal, she stooped and kissed his brow; the ineffable grace of her tenderness drew his soul away from agony. The splints in place, they left him, in some

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ease at last, and he gradually drowsed off to sleep.

She had bathed and dined, she had seen and dismissed the servants, she was on her bed, the day's work ended. The dying flickers of her lamp were winking on the wall. Outside, in their brimming pools the frogs, gorged with comfort, were croaking her to rest. Drowsiness, delicious, dizzying, was taking hold. She stretched her limbs to their extreme extent; as that dawn electric fire had filled them, so now the slower current of slumber flooded them, drowning them in peace—seas of quiet were breaking softly on her shores. The walls of her room became over her a canopy of darkness, passing into the sky of her dreams, a star-crowned, radiant roof—

“and so, shut up
In measureless content.”

But in the night, hearing her father groan—the doors were open between her room and his—she was on her feet in a moment. She

must have waked and must have remained awake—undoubtedly, for she reached his side and soothed him and made his pillows into an easier prop. But walking in the blackness she saw—did not imagine, but *saw*, as vividly as any vision of day and far more clearly than her own robed figure or her father's troubled face in the lamplight by his bed—a turbid water swelling—waves on either side of her—she herself was swaying, a cork lifted on mighty, swinging tides—dimness was about her, yet also a light that was waxing ever brighter, as when a lantern is turned gradually to the full. She trampled this stream—slowly, wondering, fearful—till she had pulled herself free on to the firm ground of her bed once more. It was after she was back that the mind shed its dream, and cleared—opening to its width, like the waxing light—before she fell asleep again. And she was smiling at a problem solved.

CHAPTER IV

I

Two days of comparative dryness followed, days of steaming discomfort. No season is more wretched than the Rains if they refuse to rain. Kitty settled down into apathetic moroseness, declining to leave the house. She played patience, and pretended to read novels. Her sense of grievance made the neighbourhood noisy, with bangings and heavy footsteps. Her father endured inaction with impatience, at best; inaction joined to the inescapable knowledge of Kitty raging brought him at times close to frenzy.

"The devil's in your sister," he told Nicky. "If she were half a dozen years younger, I'd rise, sick as I am, and *slap* her till she howled. I'm within an inch of doing it, as it is."

"Let her go to Mrs. Dermott's," Nicky advised.

"I'm damned if I will. Why should she

leave you with this helpless fool of a father and everything to do"—his hand clasped hers, in a caress that was an appeal for forgiveness—"to run the house, and see to my meals and the servants, and watch—as I know you *do*, Nicky—half the night? She's not doing her share—but it's better than leaving *all* to you."

"Dad, you're not playing fair with Kitty." It was a case for attack with audacity, and where the enemy least expected.

"What!" (You do not accuse an English gentleman of not playing fair.)

"She's two years older than me, and she's crazy about things I don't care a straw for. You know why she wanted to spend the summer here. And you know what happened. She's had a pretty poor time, has Kate."

"You've had a worse."

"No. I'm not like Kitty—I'd rather be here than anywhere else I know. And I haven't had a boy fussing round me. Dad!" (She tried a new tack.) "You two aren't giving *me* much of a chance, are you? If I had a coat of arms, it would be one of a

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rabbit cowering, supported by a wild cat and bear, both rampant."

He laughed, too lost between amusement and vexation to speak.

"Yes. *You*, sir, out of sheer obstinacy insist on keeping my sister here, when it would be a thousand times easier for me to have the house to myself. *She* chucks books about and scrapes chairs back; if you want the furniture to last a bit longer, you must get it a rest. And I'm the buffer to you both."

"All—right! Let her go—for the furniture's sake. I want to get a decent price for it, when I sell it to the chap who takes over at the end of my time."

Half ashamed, Kitty raised objections. But Nicky was nearing the limits of endurance, and was firm to be rid of at least this exacerbation. Kitty away, she could carry on. Kitty must go for her own sake, too. So with superhuman patience she held herself to the pose of indifferent calm, and answered Kitty's objections.

"There's nothing to do, now that Dad's

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mending so fast. I can easily manage everything. There's nothing else I *want* to do."

"I could at least watch at night sometimes." Kitty had never done this.

"It won't be necessary. Get away, old girl. You've had a perfectly rotten summer."

Kitty, overstrained, and in harder ways than Nicky, broke down. "Nicky, I didn't know you cared."

"Of course I cared, dear. I knew what it meant to you, when nothing happened, and you were stranded here."

"Dad would rather have you than me, I know, a thousand times over." Her tears rushed in a torrent.

"Nonsense, Kitty darling. Don't worry about us. Get away while you can. We shall have the rain back any day."

For the first time for weeks, Kitty went to bed happy, and before going even fussed round her father. As he saw her in the lamplight with her eyes shining, he was resentful; but resentment gave way to pride in her beauty. After all, it wasn't *her* fault if

she had been made for admiration and courtship, and was now ripe for them. But she might very well—as he knew, did—think it *his* fault that she was wasting her youth here. When she kissed him good-night, there was more tenderness on his side and more affection on hers, than there had been for many a month. She lingered at the door, and then burst into tears. A minute later, he heard her sobbing in her own room, while Nicky comforted her. It was close to hysteria, and he saw, in a flash of illumination what suppressed misery must have been filling her heart all these weeks. Saw, too, that he was a very stupid man. He had been for fifteen years bringing up these two girls single-handed—and what *did* he know about them, even now? He had assumed that a man's life, only with less hard work in it, was good enough for them. He had something to think about now—with this new knowledge of passion and unfulfilment in Kitty, and with the picture that had come to him, clear-cut against the glimmering dawn, of Nicky no longer a child, but resolute and

iron of will as a man, impetuously thrusting forward to save him.

2

After she had seen Kitty across the Tamravali, the wilderness received Nicky back, and solitude again encompassed her. But not idleness. If her father was to recover, a main part of the treatment must be for his mind. His job had no pension attached, and his private means were not sufficient for him to wish to retire or be willing to be told that he must retire. So Nicky ran his work—that is, the essential jobs, which were many. It was no new experience to her. To him it was misery to know that she did it, for from his new angle of vision he saw how she would appear to a lover. He held her back from many of the duties that should have been performed, had the zemindari been run with entire efficiency; and he could not help fretting with knowledge of these undone. But she was learned where cultivation was

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concerned, she could at any rate see that crops got forward.

He kept back from her, too, a deeper trouble tugging at his mind. This was the time when the long-smouldering quarrel of Administration and planter community was being fanned to an outflare. His own Company, confident of victory, were taking a hard line, and expected their employees to fall in with it. Hints to Lyon had failed; he was not going to do a single thing that cut athwart his sense of fairness, and he was sure, moreover, that the bullying and illegal methods that seemed to succeed elsewhere would mean only disaster if applied to the folk of these forested uplands. So hints gave way to a more open and threatening tone.

Nicky would have undertaken anything, and have gone anywhere. But it was as well that she was kept in ignorance and to tasks of comparative ease and safety. She was unfeignedly happy. Every minute had its own separate light and shadow; the young rice was springing; there were new leaves, not

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monotonously green but with a sprinkling of ruddy flush; *jam*-berries were glossy black, the tree hung as with the slanting almond eyes of houris innumerable; the gullies were studded with pink rain-primroses. Orioles were calling, she could see their bodies slipping amid the branches like a golden water. As warden of these marches where jungle and cultivation met, she felt a happy pride. She had rights over both—a mother and queen to the one, swift, decided, graciously masterful—a ranger to the other. It was jolly to pause in some patch of silence, with the red tassels of mimosa fringing the enormous woods that shut her round, and to imagine herself the Maiden Artemis—so much of a child was she still, and so able to find pleasure in the world of her own fancies. She had a thought that even the forest lives were under her protection; eyes that withdrew beneath bushes, withdrew slowly, and seemed to look up in half appeal. Once she rode almost on top of a bear drowsing in a hollow of the path, and Fanny, shaken by experience of the solid

earth coughing and hurtling away in a black mass, suffered from nerves for a week afterwards. It did not trouble Nicky, to whom the culprit was merely one of her subjects, remiss enough to sleep on the public roads. The villagers of Healdih insisted on taking her to caves and showing her an entrance worn smooth at the roof by bodies passing to and fro; but she laughed at their petition that she would shoot the bears. What would her jungle be without these rolling-gaited, husky-voiced marauders? But how could the people hope to harvest their sugarcane, if these creatures visited it nightly? She would bring the saheb then, and tell him to shoot them? Perhaps. The saheb could not come at present.

It was a good life. It was good to return to her father, to find him eagerly looking for her and listening for the sounds of her coming. He spent the day on a veranda now; and she would remove her sun-hat and sit on his bed to chat for a few minutes before going to change.

"There seems a peace about the house,

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now that Miss Kitty's gone," he said. "I think I'm going to get better."

3

It was in this time that Tom Felvus, Commissioner of the huge area of which Khatra was the centre and Trisulbari an insignificant pocket, felt restless and, instead of drifting off to the hills or Calcutta, undertook the crazy journey to see his old friend again. That they were friends was entirely thanks to Felvus; for after resignation Lyon had been like a wounded beast for rage and mortification, and had slipped out of sight to lick his wounds. Felvus, nowise discouraged to receive back letters sent to the Regiment, endorsed "Address Not Known," had been persistent; and in India you can find out everything and everyone, if you only want to badly enough.

He was now forty-nine; a Commissioner, with the certainty that his career would go no further. Some said that he had never got

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over a love-affair of his youth—an old story now, and its details all blurred into cloudy fable. It will not be revived in this book. It had left his brain affected—not where it touched on administration, but in all matters that called for deep and connected thinking. And profound, constructive cerebration, as the world has so often been told, has distinguished the Indian Civil Service from the first. Felvus took no highly moral view of our duties in India. He was content to be ironically happy in the existence that was spread out before his vision, and to rejoice in the life that was passing away from him so surely yet had in it so much of interest and delight. A good man in his own line, and he knew his way about; but he was never serious.

This was 1900; and, though there was an abundance of every other virtue in the British in India, there was no superfluity of either imagination or of breadth of mind and sympathy. Mr. E. M. Forster, drawing on the most retentive and observant memory of our generation, has projected the image of the

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pre-War time into our own, thereby angering those who think of the India of to-day. His shadows may be unduly darkened; and he has omitted the exceptions, the men in whom a habit of singularity had been bred by that greatest of a wise man's teachers, loneliness, and by close companionship with Indian subordinates. But the main facts, reflected in the literature that our people produced, or recollected from those hard, happy days, are enough to constrict the mind with anger and contempt.

But I have spoken of exceptions. Felvus—a bachelor, a dilettante, an amateur in more than one art, a curious observer of men, animals, plants, old buildings, anything, in fact—was one of the exceptions. This statement must not be misunderstood. The reader must not suppose that Felvus had attained to the broadminded wisdom and tolerance that are his own possession, and the possession of the writer of this book. He had attained to nothing of the sort. Nor had Miss Nicolette Lyon (whom I would have considered another exception) attained to

any such excellence. Her mind was steeped in the land with a passion that was often utter, unspeaking ecstasy; she loved the people, and did not patronise them, she knew their hardships and miseries, the poor texture of their lives, the little they asked between birth and death and how often that little was denied; she was trusted and regarded with something close to worship by tenants and servants. But she accepted them as dependents; in that jungle scheme of things they had their place as she had hers. She advised them and thought for them, and their families were not, as in a modern establishment—necessarily conducted on less lordly, wasteful lines than those of these great planter-barons—creatures hidden out of sight, but beings that she knew as individuals. But she would have been very surprised by any obstinate questioning of her will. John Wesley had an attractive way of rebutting criticism of his arbitrary method, which I paraphrase here. "They say that I am the sole judge of what is to be done or left undone—that all buildings are held in

my name—that all monies are in my hands—that no one is allowed to preach or to speak, except by my first permission—that I have the sole right to expel or to admit members of our societies.” The reader, waxing indignant on behalf of a noble evangelist so traduced, impatiently awaits the denial. But it does not come. Wesley, having completed the catalogue of tyrannies that evil tongues ascribe to him, merely adds, “That is so. And I see no hurt in it.” And he has passed to another theme, and with sweeping majesty is considering whether grace is free as the Arminians assert, or determined from before eternity, as those of Calvin’s school maintain. So with Nicky. She stood in a feudal relationship to some scores of hamlets, forest-scattered; and saw no hurt in it. Nor did anyone else. It was not so long since the days when mighty indigo-kings, such as “John Cheek the Magnificent”—his rule had extended into her very district, they had a Chikgunj not ten miles from Trisulbari, and his grave in an open garden, in a thicket of pineapples run wild—made their stately

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progress on elephants, with bands of *lathials* (club-carriers) to enforce respect and obedience. Nicky had no *lathials*, and did not value an elephant as vehicle. But her journeyings were equally imperial, and her word, though tactful and courteously spoken, equally above question in her eyes.

But Nicky—and Thomas Felvus, C.I.E., whom I had so nearly forgotten—had both of them shed certain articles of that creed outside of which their people held there was no salvation. All low-class Indians were not thieves—servants were not untrustworthy, unless you jolly well deserved that they should be—all educated Indians (though Nicky practically never met any of these) were not “seditious.” Nicky had no vote, any more than Queen Victoria, with whom the more ignorant of her subjects were believed to confuse her, had; she would have had no vote even in her own land, nor would it have occurred to her that anyone could waste time wanting so useless a thing. But Felvus thought there should be representation of Indians—he was keen on the

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development of municipal institutions—he saw that things had been held up for decades by certain unfortunate events in 1857—he maintained that the National Congress, seditious babus, and a desire to have Indians in legislative and even executive responsibility were natural and justifiable phenomena. It is true that these views—which had exposed him to personal slights and had hampered his official career, so that at forty-nine he had only recently become what he would remain to the end of his service, a divisional commissioner—had met with Indians rancorous enough to scoff at them as pinchbeck liberalism. One Calcutta pleader had summed up “His Honour’s daring opinions, which seem so dreadful to his colleagues and himself” in “the words of poet Tennyson’s one outburst of breathless radicalism:

Why should not these great sirs
Give up their parks some dozen times a year
To let the people breathe?”

But this was cruelly unjust; Thomas Felvus had paid a sufficient price for opinions honestly held, and come by after years of as genuine hard work and sincere thinking as any man ever put in, even in India. Few men by nature were more ambitious; but of the dreams with which he began his service scarcely one remained. He had intended to make his mark doubly, as a firm and wise administrator and as an interpreter between his own people and those of India. No one questioned his skill, courage, knowledge, amazing patience; a man does not make his reputation in settlement work, without qualities of insight and endurance that an archangel might envy. But he had long ago been relegated aside from high promotion, as a man whose views were "unsound"; and reluctantly he had come to acceptance of what everyone else had accepted before him, that ahead of him were no great prizes or distinctions. These were for the men whose views were sound, having been bought by the gross and kept uncontaminated by facts. So he had begun to console himself in ways

that completed the ruin of his chances, and even cast doubt upon his reputation—magnificently earned—as an administrator. He had written literary articles for the *Calcutta Review*, he had published a book of verses—*Sal-Blossom*; sentimental, whimsical, reminiscent—and latterly a couple of novels. They were not conspicuously good novels, but they were good-hearted and tolerant, with a queer afternoon wintry sunlight over them. Since their tolerance played over an Indian scene, they struck his countrymen as revealing a dangerous weakness in the head. And nothing could mitigate the damning fact that they were, after all, novels.

4

For one reason and another it had been long enough since Felvus had visited the Lyons. Nicky had put in the first of her cold weather seeds. The sound of horse-hooves would have made her look up at any time; she came to the gate of the fenced enclave

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that kept their winter peas and lettuces from goats and cattle. It was evening, and the sun struck through the trees, a shower of golden splinters. Nicky's cheeks, browned by days of exercise, shone softly, as apples in the garden of the Hesperides might have done. Felvus, startled by the lady's grace and beauty, stared forgetful of her claims—as though she were a wild deer to be watched with trembling delight, for a movement would scare it back to darkness of the woodland. He made her aware of herself, and she blushed; then he woke from his trance, and rode up to her.

Dismounted, he said, "I think you have forgotten me, Nicky." He had not seen her since she went to school in England.

"No," she said. "You are Mr. Felvus. But have you not forgotten us?"

To another the reply of gallantry would have come readily. But all Felvus said was, "You can't tell how glad I am to see you again." He repeated it. "You can't tell how glad I am. I can't imagine how I have let the time pass without looking up your father."

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A syce took over his horse, and they went towards the house. Nicky told of her father's accident. Felvus wondered how much longer a reckless man might go on tempting the seasons and the jungle. He was distressed with sudden vision of this girl left helpless and alone—for he had no faith either that Kitty would live here much longer, or that she would help, if she did, when the crash came. Angrily he assured himself that he would talk to Jack Lyon. But Nicky was still speaking, and he heard her words again. Her father was mending, and had celebrated this very day by removing his shoulder from its "figure of eight." His malaria was more troublesome—in the grief that flitted across her face Felvus had a glimpse of what ghosts haunted this fair dwelling. She had nothing of what are assumed to be necessities to a beautiful young woman—nothing of admiration or courtship, of praise or companionship or excitement. Simply existence in this whispering sea of sal, with the denser wilderness—the "wild deer ness," the jutting rocks and

close-plumaged ravines where bear and wolf and panther lived—as her wider world beyond. And a father maimed and ill.

“Where’s Kitty?” asked Felvus. “You two must have had a vile time.”

“Oh, no. Kitty has gone to Mrs. Dermott’s.”

“The Forest Service Dermott?”

“Yes. And Dad and I have had a perfect time together.”

“I can bet he has,” said Felvus softly. “But you, my dear? Do you mean to say that you—*you*, whom I remember only yesterday as a baby playing among Himalayan rhododendrons—have been with this sick man alone? Who set his arm? And who’s been his doctor?”

“Now, Mr. Felvus”—she spoke as if pained by his unreasonableness—“where were we to find a doctor? Could I have left him wretched for a solid week while I hunted round for a doctor? And in August the country was a running lake. So I got a neighbour’s syce to set the shoulder. It was easy enough to look after it, once that was done.”

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Lyon was resting on a long chair on the veranda, his shoulder pillow-propped. The sight of his face was a shock to Felvus, so drained of its old vitality. But the friends shouted to meet again; and, while Nicky set servants on to preparing a room for the guest, they plunged deep into gossip and reminiscence. Her return drew the visitor's amazement and her father's pride on to her.

"So I hear," said Felvus, "that you've been nurse, doctor, chatelaine, bailiff, zemindar, forest ranger, and I know not what else! That your nights have been spent in watching a sick-room, and your days in campering about in places where no one but a man should go, and he with a gun!"

Nicky, leaning back on the rail with her elbows resting on it, proudly disdained defence except by a look half pout, half smile. Relaxing, she grew aware that the weeks had tired her, and in the knowledge that at last she was not alone she admitted the luxury of weariness. Felvus, seeing her face light up and then go greyly out, was conscious again of the child behind this life

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of responsibility. Her father was aware of nothing except her beauty and courage, and the delightful presence of a friend.

Felvus knew countless houses where the lady was fussed and whining at her difficulties. Here all was quiet and easy efficiency. But he caught Nicky in a moment of pause before dinner, standing outside the porch and watching the crescent moon sink slowly through the still crimsoned sky. It struck him as unreal that upon such turmoil should float so untroubled a calm. That green and rosy field was flung up from a sun that was one furious burning; and the earth, spinning away from light, had thrown off, all that you could see, this infinite peace, of waveless seas of colour that carried one tiny sickle-shaped boat. The girl was herself the heart of this still loveliness. He remembered her reputation for dreaminess, and reminded her of it.

"Oh, I am now a Jekyll and Hyde girl," she said, laughing, but with a catch of sadness in her voice. "My main self is an efficient, bullying memsahib, weighing out

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tea and rice and sugar and asking why the dusters get used up so fast. But I've an incompetent self in reserve, who often asks when she is to be given a look in."

Dinner was on the veranda where Lyon rested. The visitor had borrowed clean linen from him and was rigged up in one of his old suits. Nicky might have held herself excused from wearing anything showier than her tussor frock; but deeper instincts than her gay, untroubled reason guided her, and she had changed into colour. She had seen their eyes held by her apparition in the fading light, she had felt the happiness in Felvus' gaze whenever it fell her way, and she had known—as we know the essential things of our life; *know* them, without wasting a thought upon them—that her presence was the starry thing that shot the dusk with silver. Her actions had the same natural rightness that is in a flower's response to dawn. With the lamplight about her and the forest gloom and purple September night behind her, in a glowing crimson she matched her world and gave it perfection. It was partly a woman's

passion for seeing a picture completed—she impersonally placed herself as its fulfilment, as she would have placed a lily of the right tint or a bush of brilliant leaves. For long enough no excuse for wearing colour had come her way. On this rare occasion of a social function she was happy to have all things splendid as became her father's hospitality; she was not going to let down his pride in her. Who could have misunderstood the generosity that unconsciously—yet so lavishly—made the gift of its own heightened loveliness? Not Felvus.

Yet to Felvus—and to him only, of the three friends, settled down to the long Indian evening of reminiscence, the closest and easiest intimacy the world has ever held—came a mood troubled. He was haunted by vision of the career that should have been Lyon's—not this sterile one-man desolation. If Lyon had followed the track his caste had marked out—if, after having his fling with Hester Morrison, he had married one of the correctly pedigreed ladies whom every cold weather brought to cantonments, who

would have brought him influence and valuable connections—then he would not be eating his heart out at Trisulbari. And this jewel of a girl would not be thrown away on this absurd, hard life. He felt he wanted to see her put where the whole world could see her, and be enriched by her delightfulness.

He fell silent, seeing in the lines of his own life a similar foiling of ambition. Where had he gone wrong? It was easy to see where Lyon had made his mistake; and Felvus raged as he remembered the meanness and insipidity of that Gangapahar society. "If he'd *ruined* the girl, no one in the Mianis would have cared a damn," he said bitterly, when the evening had ended and he was alone at last. "But he married her. And I say he was meant to marry her, if there's anything in this Natural Selection rot that they are talking. When she was sheer, jumping flame—an absolutely superb animal—Lyon was running the whole *physical* show of those wretched Mianis single-handed almost. You'd never guess that, to see him now."

Nicky excused herself early, having given

orders for her breakfast at dawn. She had a long trip to make on zemindari business. "Now, Dad, you are not to spend the whole night gossiping. Mr. Felvus, you are not to let him keep you up, please!" So tactfully did she put it, that the guest might feel that it was his tiredness after travel that this hostess would not have them forget. But the two talked far into the dark morning.

7

The restlessness that haunts a lonely man on the edge of old age roused Felvus early, after little sleep. He was awake before the kokils announced the first dim red fingers thrust horizontally athwart the east; and he lay thinking of many things. But his thoughts hovered in a pleasurable air, returning and returning upon the grace and delightfulness of the child he had seen, her unending charm that never repeated itself. It had been magnificent, the way she had flung aside her exquisite drabness of attire, for a no less exquisite cloud of brightness, at dinner the

night before. He felt as he had felt in the days when every vein was young, when he had looked from his tent in some winter dawn and seen the forest so tinted and freshly brilliant that he had been grateful as for a splendour personally assumed for his eyes. There had been nothing more to it—she had set out her best silver and glass, for a man who had dined evening after evening with the forks and spoons of a bachelor establishment, unpolished, probably scandalously washed—she had gathered for the table bowls of temple flowers and dashed their glowing golden-pollened centres with drops of dewlike water. And she had remembered that his eyes would be aware of herself, the unwonted presence at his meal. What absurdity is the sex writing that ignores nine-tenths of all that sex brings to men and women! Not that all this passed through Felvus' mind—he was too happy in calling up the succession of pictures the evening had imprinted on his brain. Nicky's metamorphosis, had she thought for a moment about effect, had been unneeded.

For she was not more arresting than when she had stood by the fence, with hand shading her eyes; or, with back half bent over the veranda rail, had looked amusedly on the men whose greetings and reminiscences were bubbling out.

He heard the far-off crowing of a cock in some Trisul ravine. The sound was the most exhilarating he could have heard—it tumbled about his brain a tangle of memories. He had heard it rising from a Somerset combe, to him drowsing an August morning away in reverie—the time had been when he had prowled gun in hand, in just such a wilderness as he had seen when nearing Trisulbari, trying to surprise the crows. He flung himself out of bed, absurdly joyous, and dressed quickly. He came on to the back veranda. Night was still a glimmer on the air, and bats flew in and out with mad speed, as though they had work to get done and that first cockcrow had been their warning to vanish. He saw a lantern on a path, and went towards it. It was Nicky coming from the stables.

"I've changed my mind," he told her. "I'm going to be a district wallah again, if only for a day. Let me come with you."

"Why, *of course!*" she said. "I'm so glad, Mr. Felvus. We can be back by eleven."

"I thought you were going a good dozen miles."

"Not if it's a question of getting Phelbus Saheb"—she mimicked the native pronunciation of his name—"back early to the old friend he has so shamefully forsaken—shall I say, since you rose to your high station?"

They were back on the old friendly terms. Felvus replied, "No, you shall not say that. You know very well—"

They were retracing their steps, to make the necessary new arrangements.

"You know," he said, hesitating and watching her face to see if he might trust her to forgive even a blunder, "that I've missed my way—as folk out here count things—as clearly as Lyon has done. And I haven't his compensations. If I had, Nicky, I would ask to be given nothing else."

His sincerity moved her. She knew

suddenly that of late she would have given much to have a man she could trust and ask advice from—a man like Felvus, of her father's generation, too old to fall in love with her or to tease her with compliments.

But all she said was, "Do you mind taking Captain—that creature there? I'm afraid you'll find him unexciting. But Fanny's an idiot with a stranger—and not too sensible with me. And Diamond's my own particular pet, and he won't obey anyone else. Your own nag's got to rest, of course. Captain's a solid, faithful beast."

They proved in luck. September is the month men hate. Its rains are uncertain, its heat and steam unceasing. But to-day was that first isolated forerunner of the cold weather, that comes once or twice after the month's midway. It had a breeze; and that breeze, during the hour when it was dawning, gave them a changed world.

To Felvus, accustomed to obsequious salaams wherever he went, it was an experience to find himself ignored. The forest folk, woodcutters, drivers of bullock carts,

an occasional Santal—coal-black, erect, tall bow in hand as he went hunting—without hesitation addressed their recognition to the lady, who as unhesitatingly acknowledged it. They met the steward of the Khalasi Raja, who, as we have seen, was no friend of the zemindari. But the steward was respectful to the zemindari chatelaine, bundling down from his tat to stand dismounted while she went by. She did not go by, though, without a friendly interchange of conversation. If the Raja chose to be pig-headed about that alleged matter of trespass and wood-cutting by zemindari tenants, that was no reason why she should snub his servants. And it was for Nicky that everywhere umbrellas were lowered. The Commissioner went incognito.

“Upon my word!” laughed Felvus. “In Tudor times, young lady, I could have collected evidence enough in these twenty minutes to send you to the Tower for treason. Is it the Queen-Empress’s writ that runs here? Or Miss Nicolette Lyon’s?”

“Look out, Phelbus Saheb! That was not a *dhaman*, but a cobra, that slid into the bit of

scrub you're just about to ride through. Captain may be only a country-bred; but Dad will demand his blood from me if you slay him. Also, our expedition will be considerably immobilised if we lose one of our two mounts."

They had a river to cross. Men splashing thigh-deep towards them showed the ford. One, careless, stepped into an old water-hole and plunged in to above his head, to emerge spluttering. His companions laughed uproariously, looking up to Nicky in the expectation—not disappointed—that their mirth would be shared. But she had no wish to contribute to it, and before they crossed she marked the danger-spot. The crossing was a sheer delight compounded of a thousand tiny sights and sounds—as a July noon in Devon is one shimmer of sunny scents and drifting seeds. The chocolate-brown eddies—a clearer pool ocellated like a peacock's fan, the light straying over its surface—the sleek, placid flow—the splashing of the horses, warily feeling their footing—Diamond's neck arched at an imagined

danger, a floating stick in the quivering water not unlike a wriggling snake—indeed, indeed, it was Nicky's fault, for she had given the involuntary jump her subconscious self demanded—the dazzle of the ploughed-up spray, a fountain running through the Sun-God's fingers—the jingling of bits and jolly creak of leather—a tall man wading with a swimming motion, his body turning from side to side, as though each flank were an arm—the queer, wizened face of an old fellow seeking a place for his wickerwork net—blue of a kingfisher perched on a twig upthrust from an anchored branch drifted close inshore. Then joy of crisp, hard sands, till they reached a narrow backwater and had to wade again. Women here, filling their pots—peasant women; but what a carriage, in those soft, brown forms, straightened like cypresses to the vessels on their heads! Even in this clear dawn they were slips of gliding twilight.

To himself Felvus said, in a dream, "I'm going to tell Lyon he's an *ass*, an utter *ass*, to be brooding over those fools who

thought that ribbons and stars and all that kind of swank were the only things worth while. What more can you get out of life than this? I've not been alive for years—and I used to be alive every day of my life! All the same, he ought not to keep this girl here."

He waited while she did the zemindari's errand in the village that was their goal. He was amused; and frankly interested, to see the jungle life again, the forest so close to these doors that it seemed to be eaves-dropping on the people's chatter. Nicky turned from time to time, to apologise for employing the Commissioner as a groom—he was seated on a rock, and holding both bridles—or to smile at him because of some absurdity that she knew he would catch, even in this forest patois.

On the journey back, he was lost in silent happiness, his eyes straying over the forest. She turned to him with her flashing smile. "Do you *like* this country, Phelbus Saheb?"

"What? This land of Lyonnese?" (for so he had named it). "Nicky, if the Gods

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would give me eternal youth, with my brain steadily growing all the time, I could live here for ever. I *know* it's a burnt-up, rutted place, with red dry fingers running through the green plush of the jungle. But it's *infinite*, there's room in it for the storm and for the peace that comes after the storm." Then he quoted,

"A land of old upheaven from the abyss
By fire, to sink into the abyss again;
Where fragments of forgotten peoples
dwelt."

"That's why I love it too," she said. "When I once get out of the house, I feel as if I could wander on for ever; there's no limit that I have ever found. Not in a day's ride, anyway."

Presently she pointed to a massive teak, lying uprooted. "I was caught in the same tempest. It wasn't two months back; I had these good ten miles to go, with the air simply *hurtling* with snapped-off boughs."

Her eyes lit up with momentary re-

miniscence, even as she laughed; in the chambers of his brain, that blurred suddenly, Felvus saw part of her life of these weeks past. The forest blinded with the moving walls of rain; she had been caught out in such a time as that. Thunder and lightning, terrible, tropical angers, strewing a helpless girl's pathway with horror. How much had that fool Lyon permitted to happen? How much had he even seen? Felvus grew hotly unjust, his heart wildly excited at thought of the lot of the man who should have the right to guard her from such follies and to set her where others could see how unspoiled and dear she was. But he did not think of himself as that man. He was too old, to throw a shadow over this young existence. He was only "Old Felvy," never mentioned but with a hint of ridicule attached to the words.

CHAPTER V

I

SEVEN weeks had passed since Lyon's accident. The visit of Felvus was a vanishing brightness. Kitty's absence continued. Her occasional letters, sent by the medium of a coolie, were glowing ones. She offered to return; but Nicky assured her there was no need.

Lyon's malaria did not greatly mend. But he was used to its recurrences, and refused to let it keep him in bed, once it became intermittent and his fractures had closed. When October began he fretted to have let work slide so long, except for places within a day's ride, which Nicky had seen to. He now planned cold weather tours, in which his daughters could accompany him. They were good fun, and often brought you up alongside other folk, camps of settlement or forest officers or engineers.

After September's discomforts October brought swift amelioration. This year it brought also a letter from Kitty, that was incoherent with happiness. She was in love with Tom Steele, the most wonderful boy she had ever met, he wanted her to marry him. "Nicky darling, tell Dad what a dear he is. You know him, you met him at Khatra and danced with him, and he says you are a splendid kid." In fine, she was bringing him over to make their father's acquaintance. They would be riding through on Friday.

"It's all right, I daresay," Lyon grumbled. "I knew some young man would be carrying Kitty off soon. But why should *we* be bothered with him?"

"Unnatural parent!" said Nicky. "Will you say that when *I* bring a boy along?"

"No, by Hades! He'll have to pass every sort of test I can devise, and then some over. But Kitty's a good, ordinary sort of girl, and deserves a good ordinary sort of man."

"She's got him," said Nicky, who remembered Tom Steele. He had been very brainless and noisy, and fertile in thinking out pointless pranks.

"Oh, of course, you've met him. Well, that's all right then. Only why must he come now, and finish the ripping time my baby and I have had together? We *have* become pals, haven't we?"

"Chums, Dad. But we must be hospitable. We've heaps of room for all the young men that come along."

"Right-o. We'll house Master Tom. And Miss Kitty can have a good quiet time with him."

"She'll have a good time, doubtless. But it's not likely to be a particularly quiet time."

He groaned agreement.

They were expected to arrive after sunset. Late in the afternoon Nicky came in from a jungle trip. She was hot and happy, her hair flung out. In the house she must walk in demure matron wise. But two miles from Trisulbari, where a long stretch of heath began, she must have her tresses free. It was a symbol of liberty, before the coming of Kitty and her boy clamped her down to convention. Not ten minutes before, she might have been seen with comb and pins

pursed between her lips while she loosened her hair from beneath her sun-hat—no easy matter, when you have but two hands, and one has to quiet a horse who has a straight gallop between him and home and can guess why he has been halted—as the bow may guess, drawn tense before release. Nicky, entering the house, removed her helmet; then her father saw her put it back, and asked, “Whither away, O buskined Amazon?”

“I have just been ‘struck with the splendour of a sudden thought,’ Daddy. I’m going to bathe at the Nymph’s Leap, as one would expect a buskined Amazon to do. It’s *ages* since I did it. And now I’m as hot as—well, anything that a man gets as hot as. I may be late back. I’ve a notion that I want to see the moon rise from Trisul. Kitty won’t miss me, with her young man; and you’ll be wanting to get to know your son-in-law to be.”

She whisked out again, and he heard her shouting, “Piarilal! Piarilal!” This was the servant who was usually set on guard at the one patch by which the waterfall’s foot could be approached. He was instructed to turn

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away anyone straying in its direction; and Nicky came back for towel and walking clothes.

The bottom of the Leap was almost completely enclosed with huge boulders, tumbled from some ancient landslide; to its summit there was no approach. The last and most considerable fall was a sheer twenty feet, to a sloping rock that glanced the water aside to a pool. The pool was deep and wide—you could swim in it, and it had a rock jutting up near its centre. For most of the year it was dry, but now, when the Rains had not long finished, indeed, had hardly finished, it carried a sufficiency.

2

Nicky had shaken back her hair before drenching it. It was a brown silken brook rippling over her shoulders. It was so soft to ruffle in her hands that she was in no hurry to wet it, though for safety's sake she must do so if she were to bathe before the sun was

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down. She hated the convention by which she must keep it netted up and folded. When every touch of being was so precious, why must she miss the feel of the wind's fingers in it?

The pool was so clear that she had seen a watersnake poised in its shallows, his head at the surface watching for frogs. He slid down; splashes told her that others had left rocks where they had been basking. On these boulders there was no herbage in which a noxious worm could hide; watersnakes, which are harmless, she did not bother about. But she glanced round, to make sure no cobra was using her pool; then she made her way to a ledge that jutted into deep water. After she had—at infinite leisure, for she was weary—undressed and fondled the smooth, soft cascades tumbling round her face, she tossed them free. A breeze swept up from the foot of the fall, and played about her high-held throat. The closeness of these weeks of watching by her father vanished; it was as when a trouble leaves the brain, and the brow unwrinkles, and the thought

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bounds upward. She knew only that her body, which had known such tiredness, felt an immortal thing. She could have walked into any sunlit glade, and have said to any shepherd: "I am Artemis; and in these veins is not blood, but ichor. I do not know what men call weariness or pain. My being is delightful to myself, and I am its mistress. See! I touch the quivering tip of this tree, and the sap of all the spring is moving in my limbs." And the shepherd would have worshipped, in the face of that divineness.

With hands at anchor on the rock behind her she lowered herself. There was nothing of the glacial coldness of a mountain lake—only a coolness so gentle yet invigorating that she was willing to have given almost boundless time for it to cover her, that every nerve might have its separate taste. Her face was tilted, rejoicing in the sky growing white for evening, and the kites serenely drifting far aloft. A quick change of impulse, she had flung over and was thrusting hand over hand to the island boulder. She was not ready to land yet, it was so glorious to be

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upborne, to be nothing but lithe muscle and sensation. The tumbling crystals of the fall invited her—part of it struck a midway shelf, curving over in a gush of snow, to spray out another eight feet, and slide down a stone into the pool. To this shower she swam across.

3

She had taken off her outer things before leaving the house, and had come in a long rain-coat. She now made a bundle of clothes and towels, and sought out Piarilal, who was bidden to carry them back. She turned to take the mountain path. A green dress reached to her knees—unconventional garb for those days, but befitting a woodland dweller; her head was uncovered, her hair, already dry, still free.

It was then that she came face to face with Norman Rivers.

"Miss Lyon," he said. And for some moments seemed as if he could never say anything more.

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She needed no setting but herself. It would have been easy to imagine her against a wild pomegranate tree—the nymph against a trellis of polished green, sown with buds of sharpest scarlet. Or amid a copse of sal whose young leaves were reddened with the first new blood of the cold weather. But I am putting down nothing but what the boy saw—and that was one small, uptilted face. She was stepping from a lower path to an upper; one knee was crooked, her dress falling from it like a kilt or kirtle. She sprang to the higher level, and gave him her hand.

“Miss Lyon,” he said again. Then blurted out, “Your sister asked me over. I got ten days’ shooting leave, and Mrs. Dermott kindly invited me to spend it with them. Your sister,” he began again. “Your sister—”

“Yes?” she said encouragingly.

But she knew the whole story. Kitty had forgone the pleasantness of a journey alone with her lover, partly out of abounding good nature, partly because she had calculated that Nicky would have to give time

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to this new guest, thereby taking him and herself where they would not be bothering Kitty and Tom.

"Your sister very kindly asked me over, when she found that I knew you."

"But how *nice!*" said Nicky dutifully. "And how nice of Mrs. Dermott to spare you to us!" She added, "I suppose your leave's nearly up?"

"No," he confessed. "I came only the day before yesterday."

"She'll be expecting you back to-morrow," said Nicky decidedly. "Bad luck on us! You can't leave a hostess so soon, except for a flying visit."

But, looking in his face, she saw very clearly that he could. She had been wanting to laugh, but a sense that discipline must be maintained and that one hostess must support another had carried her through this demure mischief. And now he threw pretence away, and said very humbly, "I've been simply wild for another sight of you. It's hardly fair to say your sister asked me over. I asked myself—practically, that is."

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"Miss Lyon," he continued, unable to keep neutral and silent while his fate trembled in the decisions forming behind that mask. "You would not let me see you safe that day. But I simply could not stand the thought of you being alone—and perhaps in danger. It was absurd to let a girl go off like that."

"It was going to be dark, too," he added.

It was not; there had been a good three hours of excellent light, amply enough to finish ten miles, and to have several mishaps thrown in. But the danger existed in his thought—that was sufficient to make it too real for her to controvert him.

"So"—he came to a conclusion, half defiant, half ashamed. "I rode after you the whole way, to see that nothing happened."

He had made her "conspicuous," then, after all—after being expressly forbidden. What *would* the Stones—that terrible household—think, from now on? But Nicky found she did not care. She *ought* to be angry. But she was not going to be. In a moment her superimposed self fell away. She forgot her duties, even the elementary one of

asking if this newly arrived guest had been received at the house after his journey—which to a moment's reflection he obviously had not. She saw only that he was very companionable, very eager; and remembered what she would hardly have known at any other time, that Trisul was a densely forested hill on which night was about to fall. She paused, thinking. She would have heard if there were either bears or leopards on it. One or both of these came every two or three years, and their bungalow was carpeted with skins of these unaccepted zemindari tenants that her father had shot. Hyenas lived unmolested in its deep ravines; but for these she cared as little as she did for jackals.

She decided to go on. "Come on!" she said. "I am going to climb this hill. It's going to be heavenly to see the moon rise presently. I'll excuse you afterwards from changing for dinner."

"Do you go out here alone?" he faltered, "without a gun or a servant or a dog?"

"And what good would a dog be?" she asked him. "An invitation to any stray

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panther that happened to be within earshot of his bark! I was fool enough to bring a dog up this hill once—a lovely terrier that Dad gave me. It was five years ago, when I was just a kid. We'd got a bit beyond the place where we now are, when poor Caesar began to whimper and tried to slip behind me. I knew then what had happened—we had what we get sometimes, a panther from those Pachete jungles which you can see when we reach the top. Hunting here for a change, I suppose. Or he was a youngster whose parents had turned him out to find a practice of his own."

"What on earth did you do?"

"Turned back. But it was too late. I shall never forget the feeling I had of being dogged all the way. No!" She laughed, a little hysterically. "Not *dogged*—*panthered* all the way. The bushes were shaking all along this track. It was only with breeze, of course. But I was walking like a turning top, with that wretched, whimpering animal gyrating round with me. I was quite dizzy when we reached the bottom."

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"You got him home safely?"

"I did not," she said, distressed. "I *thought* we were safe. So did he, for when we were close to the house he ran ahead. We were actually in our own grounds, too; but it wasn't more than a few yards that he got before he stood transfixed with horror—and so did I. It was the genuine shaking at last—a bush quivering as if its heart were alive and as frightened as mine. And out of it jumped the hugest leopard I ever saw, and just coolly picked up Cæsar and walked off. I'll never forget the look in the poor brute's eyes. You see"—she paused, but went on—"he'd thought me a deity, and now he found I was merely a silly, helpless girl. The whole thing was over in a couple of seconds. I've never cared to keep a dog since."

He had taken advantage of her momentary breathlessness and the shadow that remembered nervousness cast, to offer his hand in getting across some boulders; Nicky, who would have scorned the suggestion that she needed a man's strength to surmount the roughness of the forest, as often as not

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accepted his help. She excused herself by saying, "It will be all right coming back; we shall have the moon. But we must hurry to reach the top. There's an awkward twenty minutes before moonrise when it's really darkish, and we shall be in bad scrub. I don't want to step on a Russell's viper. Some of these rocks are alive with them."

And Nicky, glancing curiously at herself, a being half in shadow and rarely noticed by her, was aware of a change from the competent girl of her own legend, who strode her unrestricted way at all hours. Since she returned from England there *were*—undeniably—new fears; and a new, sophisticated self does not vanish again, merely for a word or a wish. Her impetuous mood, born of the abounding vitality that the cool waters had given her limbs, would have passed (she realised this now) once she had found herself on that last dark half hour below Trisul's summit. Who knows what ghosts and goblins she would have seen? The wretched little tricky goblins of the Indian forest, twigs that suddenly metamorphose themselves

under your very tread into a twisting viper, shadows that may be the impress of a panther coldly and insolently watching you invade his home. Nor would even moonrise have been untroubled ecstasy; still less the return in moonlight. For in moonlight one cannot always tell which is bush and which is bear, as Shakespeare long ago remarked. And the forest held long spaces which no moonlight pierced. She knew now that her heart would have jumped merely to see a jungle trafficker, some Santal with black fuzzed-up locks and his bamboo bow and arrows, appear before her. A man passes by such discoveries, and is unaffected, except for the greater caution that self-knowledge and self-distrust bring; it is his business to go through action, and he cannot afford to let his courage be shadowed. But action is not a woman's business. Nicky knew that she could not have easily borne another such revelatory terror as she had known already. Her life held its own ghosts, which she would confront and overcome; but these were not her ghosts, she had no talisman against them. The boy had—

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and his calmness was increased a hundred-fold by his inexpressibly happy consciousness that his strength was a shield before the girl's courage.

The "path" disappeared into the dry stony bed of a Rains torrent, canopied by forest. Norman paused, questioning. "That's the way," said Nicky. So he plunged ahead, with the most careful heed breaking off branches or holding them till she was safe from their swinging back. He was fortunate, too, in that he saw a karait that came, alarmed by their noise, wriggling swiftly past them. He had no stick. Nicky had, but it was too stiff to have been of any use in that confined space. But Norman valorously kicked at the worm, and deflected it from her. She cried out, and scolded him for his recklessness. Very sweet was it to him, to be scolded by her, and for such a deed.

They emerged, the summit before them; and she was the quicker in clambering on to the rocky platform out of which the three prongs of the Great God's trident thrust. These were all marigold-garlanded, and the

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central one had ropes of jasmine, which impregnated the air with sweetness. Nicky was the first up; so to Norman, the clumsier, she extended a helping hand. The gloom and silence of the long forest corridor up which they had come, and the rumoured and imagined dangers of the forest, had drawn them close in comradeship. The touch of her fingers struck fire to every vein of the boy's being, and the fire returned in equal heat to her own. For the first time in her life, Nicky, confronted by the magnificent spaces through which the leaden-silver ran of river and pool—streaks of spilt metal—and from which the smoke of hamlets rose, had no eyes for them—no eyes at all—but was facing her companion. She recovered herself, and turned to the scene. It flooded her with the old madness, and she gripped his arm, crying, "Oh, look!" And he looked, but in happiness too great to leave him senses for what he saw—which was not the very scene itself, but his own swimming pleasure suffusing it. There was nothing present to his eyes but such an insubstantial glory as must hover over the

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landscape of Paradise, to the vision of those newly come, who see the dawn-mists rising from its rivers and plains.

Yet to a lonely watcher the scene would have been one to draw out the heart. The "path" by which they had come had plunged them into an unreal and exaggerated darkness—it was a cleft so deeply entrenched that it was only at points of occasional emergence that the sunset had bronzed it, bursting through the roof of forest like an explosion. Now—the climax of sunset had passed, but there remained the vast of infinity suffused with rose that shaded off into tender green and a pure white and the deep black azure of distance and of coming night. To the north they saw the belt of wilderness that stretched continuously to where Pachete thrust up—a higher hill than this, and fledged with denser woods. There was forest to south and west also, but forest broken by pockets of cultivation, and intersected by streams. It grew late; an expanding brightness told them of the moon in ambush behind another hill. Nicky impulsively touched Norman's arm,

and sprang down; he followed to where they could watch the moon, now only twenty-four hours past its fullness, show through a screen of leaves and slowly mount above them. It was still too close to the earth and its shadows to be in its free, unentangled, mid-heaven clarity, but those shadows deepened its gold to a burning orange.

The girl turned, her eyes shining. "You know, there isn't *any—human—feeling*—not even my feeling for my father," she added passionately, striking the ground with her foot as though she were seeking to expel some numbness from her being and to be sure of herself and her movements again, "that can for a moment compete with—oh, what perfectly *damnably* words you are using, Nicolette! you little, mincing idiot! I've got to say *compete*," she added— "with the feeling one gets looking out over a scene like this!"

Yet, looking in the boy's face, she lost the sincerity that had flung out these words; and, helpless in a sea not herself, as if some gulf of waters was opening and flowing beneath and about her, she thought suddenly that if

in that moment he had claimed her she did not know how she could have denied him. Luckily, to his more conventional mind her words struck chilly; he was vaguely repelled, while despair deepened his longing for her, to seem to see her withdrawing from the ranks of women whom men may love into those of goddesses and bloodless ecstasies that are apart from the love of men. She saw the protest in his spirit, that he had been shocked by the thought of her having only dutifulness towards her father, but passion for these inanimate woods and empty skies. She wanted to cry out, "You dear, silly boy, I see I was wrong! Come back all I said!" He looked so like a hurt child that she wanted to comfort him. Amused and frightened by herself, by the discovery that the old moods were now so fickle to her mind in which they had lived so long, by his earnestness and distress, she looked more closely (and held her breath in amazement, registering a vow to examine this matter at leisure, for there was plainly some new and undiscovered Nicolette to reckon with) at the far more

dangerous protest in her own spirit, the riot in her blood that clamoured for outlet another way, not to be spilt in dreams and broodings on the brute sod and stolid trees. She said to herself, "It's the night—the jungle—and this perfectly heavenly, *heavenly* moon. Not this boy at all—though he's a nice boy!" Aloud she said, "But, heavens! what *will* they think of us at the house? And of me—for taking a newly arrived guest out into the briars and brambles without even asking him to rest! They'll have dined by now; or else be waiting for us, and cursing us for a pair of wild children!"

Seriously vexed with herself, she led the way back at such a pace that he could not keep up with her. That he might, she stopped continually; then impatiently plunged ahead again. At the bungalow it was as she had predicted; dinner was all but over. There was nothing to do but to put a bold face on things. "Just wash your face and hands," she told her fellow-sinner. "There's no time to change." Then they went in, and Nicky carried it off by the vivacity and friendliness

with which she renewed acquaintance with her relation to be. But her cheeks remained flushed and brilliant, her eyes like stars up which an arctic wind has sharply been blowing; and the boy still had no eyes for anything else. Her story, which would normally, since hers, have been so quickly accepted, as "just like Nicky—she does the maddest things," faltered in her telling, for to her it sounded improbable. "I had made up my mind that I was going to see the moon rise from Trisul. It's ages, simply *ages*, since I saw it. And poor Mr. Rivers had the bad luck to run into me when my purpose was all set, and I dragged him along at my chariot wheels. Nothing on earth," she asseverated, with an emphasis that failed in the utterance, her voice suddenly drooping as if broken-winged, because to her, the speaker, it sounded like braggadocio and protesting too much, "would have turned me back, once I had started up Trisul. The evening's too *heavenly* for words!" All this from Nicky, who ordinarily would have glided in with shining eyes and have gone by unspeaking, or saying

little and that about the next household job to be done!

Luckily, Tom and Kitty were in uproarious spirits; and she took comfort, and recovered from the embarrassment of their late, unconventional arrival. But presently, herself now serenely liberated, she was aware of her father troubled and with watchful eyes upon her. There was no darkness in her own mind to respond to this darkening from without; and, as a thought that made her redden crossed it, defiance blazed. Well, what of it? If she went the way fate and her will led, she would go unashamed. Then love and pity supervened, for a spirit so vexed and burdened.

It was not till after breakfast next morning that they had opportunity to talk together. It was an opportunity that she made, determined to end the strain upon her. She was aware of his glance still fixed upon her, whenever her duties brought her near.

His words were an unfortunate beginning. "That boy's trailing after you every blessed minute," he snapped.

"What's he to do? Kitty and Tom don't want him. And he's a guest here. And I—whether I like it or not—am hostess."

For the first time in her life, her face showed him anger only. He was not a man to answer that challenge gently.

"A guest! What fetched him? Tom and Kitty didn't want him," he sneered. "And he didn't know us."

"He knew *me*. He says he wished to see me again, if you want to know."

"If I want to know! That Spencer-Rivers' son is in love with my daughter!"

"Yes, his name is Rivers. I don't know about the Spencer. Who is Spencer-Rivers, anyway?"

"Where did you meet?"

"He was at the Stones', that day I went to fetch Ibrahim."

"You met him *there*—and you never told me!" He was ablaze with indignation, "You—from whom I have never kept a thing!"

"You've kept from me who Spencer-Rivers was, anyway, and why it should be so

terrible a thing for me to be on speaking terms with his son!"

To both of them came realisation that the quarrel had become a pretty vulgar thing. Tones of indignation, looks of defiance, suspicion—the love and dignity of both had been overturned. These came back, in a pause of gazing without speaking; the deep intimacy of lonely years together should count for something still. Nicky followed up the silence by saying in her old gentle manner, "Dad, I never mentioned that I had met him, because I had clean forgotten. There! you know now how little impression he made on me! His coming took me entirely by surprise."

He was reasonable. After all, it was not her fault that the boy had remembered, when she had forgotten; his great love and pride reminded him, it was not the boy's fault even, for it was what he was bound to do.

He said, "It was over this boy's father that I had to leave the Mianis."

His look was pleading. It said, "Don't humiliate me by bringing my past cheek by

jowl with the present, that has persuaded itself—*almost*—that it has forgotten!" He had cherished his self-esteem and his bitter wrong all these years; and the old savage wretchedness was flaming up at sound of a name that had once lived in his passionate anger. As she looked at him, irresolute, he weakened so far as to speak his appeal. "Don't let me down, dear! I couldn't stand it!"

It was a mistake, rousing in her all the opposition of her sense of fairness. She scorned him, that he could so take advantage of her love for him and his physical frailty. Then, in his face, that had gone ashen, she saw that he was old—he was broken down, long before age had broken him—illness and loneliness and pride and misery had made him *this*, from the strength and confidence that had seemed immortal, not so many years since. She remembered, too, that it was only towards her, his own child, that he was weak; she was all he had, and their perfect friendship was his hold on life. In quick generosity she banished scorn and resentment.

"Dad, I'll send him away to-morrow."

It was her own mother, too, that this boy's father had despised and wronged—*that* much Nicky knew of the old unhappy story. For the life in which her own had been folded, a woman whose days had been shadowed and cut short, anger took arms after all this passage of time; and for a moment she was resolute as her father.

He was glad, not foreseeing the price he might pay later for exacting so unreasonable a sacrifice, from a spirit independent as his own. But he was remorseful, too; and a few moments later he asked her, "Nicky, you aren't in any danger of getting fond of this boy?"

"I'm afraid I am," she replied.

4

Norman was to accompany her that evening to a village that was deeply involved with outside moneylenders. If Nicky could discover the amount of their indebtedness—an

extraordinarily difficult thing to do—something might be done for them. The village then proposed to grow jute for the Samodar Company.

Six months ago she had helped Chandbara, a village almost equally enslaved. She had managed—an incredible thing, but it can happen in India, if undertaken by a person with prestige and persistence; Nicky had plenty of both—to induce the moneylender to accept a composition fifty per cent below his nominal rights (these, of course, swollen by interest absurdly out of proportion to his original loans). Her father had persuaded the zemindari to meet this composition, and to take the moneylender's place as creditor. The experiment had not been encouraging. Nicky's action had been assumed to be enormously profitable to her, and the people had vexed her by earnest efforts to borrow afresh. It had been nearly impossible to keep them to their job of cultivating and repaying their rescuers, known to be fabulously wealthy.

To-day she had less than her usual

patience, confronted by tergiversation and suppression or forgetfulness of truth. "The infinite *leisure* of these people's lying!" she said. Norman saw another side of her, how imperious and haughty she could be. She lost all sympathy at last. Her mind was not on these wretched fools or on their ways of wasting her time, but on the boy who had come out with her. All the way he had been considerate of her silence, accepting it as her tribute to the forest she loved. He was watchful of her convenience now, and courteous through the long dreary wrangling. She flung out apologies to him; the sight of her guest and companion kept needlessly seated in a fly-maddened jungle village, while the evening was going out gloriously in the wilderness they had left, added to the asperity she felt. The discussion went wrong. The ryots were flustered by an anger so direct and unusual in the Rani. And frustration passed into fright and bewilderment when she flung away from them in disgust and disdain.

"Come along, Norman"—the first time

she had dropped the "Mr. Rivers." "These idiots will never learn that if they want to be helped they must chuck insulting your intelligence by lies that a baby could see through. I've done with them."

She dashed away up the village. Norman following, saw her (already far ahead) turn aside, a good mile within the forest, and when he came up he found her in a neglected mango orchard that had merged indistinguishably with the jungle. She was dismounted, standing in shade. Shame at her petulance flushed her cheeks; it had been undignified to race off like that, and all because a gang of dunces had beaten her.

"I want to say something," she said abruptly. "When I've explained things we'll go home."

"Your name *is* Spencer-Rivers, isn't it?" she added.

"Yes. But why? I got so sick of using that mouthful every time I introduced myself, that I chucked the Spencer. Besides, Dad was so absurdly pompous about it."

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He was frightened by her excitement; he felt it meant bad news for him. "Norman," she said, "you must get back to Mrs. Dermott to-morrow morning. I'm *awfully* sorry. My dear, you don't *know* how gladly I'd keep you. It's long enough since we had a guest as welcome—to me, that is."

He knew that he had no business to linger here, when he had a hostess elsewhere. But she saw that he was prepared to sacrifice Mrs. Dermott's—or any other lady's—good opinion of him, to stay.

He was dogged, and resolute to make her tell him what he already knew. "Why must I go?" he asked.

She countered with frankness. "I suppose I ought to say—what is *true*—that it's not playing the game with one hostess, to leave her as soon as you come to her, for another hostess—who hadn't even invited you! You can't play fast and loose like that with obligations of hospitality. But I'm not going to bother to lie to you, Norman. I like you too well. You can't stay, because we might—I might, anyway—get too fond of each other.

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I like you; I don't mind admitting that I've never liked any boy better."

He had not dared to dream of so swift an entrance into hope, and his eyes flamed. Had she stridden up to him in that forest garden and offered him her love, it would have seemed only that old stories had come true. Venus must have come to Anchises so, and Diana to Endymion awakened from his dream. Yet in no goddess's countenance could have shone so high a courage, so lonely and challenging a pride. He knew that she was not offering him love. But friendliness was happiness. He listened in a trance between fear and delight, and did not answer.

The last brightness suffused the groves, as though a thousand spirits were walking there. You could see no forms; but a living serenity, a beauty that was aware of the golden hour and rejoiced in it, was abroad. Only man's foolish heart would have desired voice or vision; for this was the manner in which our souls shall move again in this world that we have loved, when we have

shed the body. Norman remembered the hour, its ecstasy and tremors; its utter purity was a cloud of splendour about the girl who confronted him. The hour in passing became a memory that gave his thoughts a home.

He said at last, "I loved you the moment I saw you. I'm not going for fifty Mrs. Dermotts. Why should you be afraid of getting to love me, Nicky?"

"You'll gain nothing by offering to be a boor for my sake," she said. But said it as for form's sake, and not as one offended. After all, she had given him no reason why he should go; it was playing with them both to put forward a social obligation as reason for severance. "Norman, you don't understand. It's for Dad's sake. You think of us"—she reddened, but with pride rather than shame, as Apollo might have done when admitting himself the thrall of Admetus—"as zemindari wallahs. But it's your Dad's fault that we are. He's the colonel of the Mianis, isn't he?"

"Yes," he said, startled.

"My Dad was an officer in the Mianis over

twenty years ago. Oh, *don't* make me tell you!" She stamped her foot, in vexation with the conventions that made humiliation where none existed, and made hesitancy—where she should be free, in her own right as the independent spirit she was—to speak to this boy of all that had happened. "Norman, they quarrelled over a woman—my mother. And Dad had to chuck his commission—and his life's job. That's why he's a zemindari wallah here—and so—so old and ill and broken up, when he was never meant to be. It was all your Dad's fault."

She was crying, fiercely and passionately. Agonised by the sight of her distress, he had thrown an arm about her, and she buried her face on his shoulder. He was saying foolish, sweet things, comforting her with an anger and sorrow that were all on her side; and she was listening. But the spasm passed, and she pulled herself free of weakness.

"Norman—my *dear!*—you mustn't do it. Leave me alone. You must go to-morrow."

"Why?"

"I've told you."

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"I thought that Montagu and Capulet business was out of date. And anyway, the old people were damned fools. Doesn't everyone say they were?"

"Yes. But that was in a play. This is life." She smiled wanly, at the ghost of irony that had escaped her.

"And, because your Dad and mine quarrelled, I've got to lose *you*!" Scorn and revolt mounted in his tones. "Why? *Why*? Honestly, Nicky, you've given me no reason that a man would take."

"You've got to take it, Norman. It's meant everything to Dad. His whole life ruined, and his mind and soul made bitter all these years. It's all but killed him. You think bitterness can't kill a man? I've watched it doing it—ever since I was a kid old enough to notice anything. And I tell you, I *love* this man—you've no *idea* how I love him. I simply can't let him down."

This was not the girl who had said of that moonlight that no human relationship could compete with it.

"I've precious little to do with my Dad,

since Mother died. Especially since he married that—well, she's not a woman, Nicky, she's just one social event after another. That's why I went into the R.E.'s, instead of the Mianis. I couldn't stand having to go their pace or live in the same station."

"I can't let Dad down," she repeated. "And I won't. He's not going to enter into relations again with the man who ruined his life."

"I'll resign my own commission," he said.

"You don't understand——"

"I'll do anything you like, Nicky. I'll live anywhere you choose."

"That was what Dad thought Mother would do. But it was the name of the Mianis that she married as much as him; and when he resigned and took her to a tea-plantation lost in the jungle she hated him. And that's why Kitty hates him—sometimes. She thinks he ruined Mother's life, and is ruining hers too."

"Your Mother didn't love him, Nicky."

"Yes, she did. But it was hard, Norman. It was too much, for her to give up what she

thought she had gained—and for him to give up his whole life's dream. And you would never forgive me if you did the same for me. No, you wouldn't."

"What was the trouble between my Dad and yours?"

"The Mianis thought Mother not good enough to marry into their regiment."

"Thank God I'm not in the Mianis! They're the beastliest snobs in India—which is saying a lot, Nicky. I'm in the R.E.'s, where you have to do some work sometimes—and I believe I could get on to Survey work. Nicky, you'd like that—getting about in new strange places, and finding out about heights of mountains and things."

"I should *love* it," she sighed.

"Darling, I'll resign and come here, if you only say you'd like it. Or go anywhere else you choose."

"No. I shouldn't be safe. No, *please*"—checking renewed attempts to take her in his arms. "We've got to fight this out as *fact*. My dear, I believe I love you—at this moment I feel as if I'd loved you all my life.

But I can't trust this moment—it's all too unreal. But it wouldn't be unreal, my letting you chuck your career and all that your life now is. I've watched one man growing bitter because he has lost his life. I won't risk it, Norman. I'm not always going to be young and what you think lovely. My dear, you've *got* to go away. I've fixed everything, there's a coolie coming for your kit to-night, it's full moon and he can travel all night. Now, if you're a good boy I'll see you halfway to-morrow morning. But that's all I can do."

"No. If you're asking me to do all this, you can kiss me."

"You've kissed me once already."

"But you're asking me to do more than any man could be expected to do."

A moment later, he added, "All the same, I'm going to peg away till I've got round your Dad—or persuaded his daughter that he doesn't matter all that much."

"Perjurer! All right! If you *can*! But you are not to do it on *our* premises, that's all."

"Where *am* I to do it?"

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"That's for you—or luck—to find out But at present I don't see where. You've been very nice to me, Norman. But we'd best forget each other."

"Never let yourself be fooled into dreaming that I shall!"

"Next year I shall be reading in the *Statesman* what "Our Simla Correspondent" says about the social event of the season, and of how very popular Mr. Norman Spencer-Rivers and his dazzling young bride are in those mountainous but *far* from uncivilised fastnesses."

5

Returning, she was back in inaccessibility, a friendly smiling companion. The boy's eyes and worship were all for her, and the sunset flamed out unheeded. She was teasing him—unwittingly—by reference to a hundred sights by the way.

"Norman's going back to-morrow," she told her father abruptly.

Now that it was won, the achievement of

his purpose brought Lyon no peace. He could not go back on it, or regret it; but it left him with an unreasonable feeling of meanness and injustice in himself. Between him and his child was something that called for justification. He tried to remove it, saying weakly, "It was because of his father that I had to leave the Mianis."

What had carried itself all these years with the dignity of tragedy was dwindling into the triviality of a spoilt boy's complaint to companions too busy or contemptuous to listen to him.

"Well," said Nicky, coolly and defiantly, "his son is prepared to resign *his* commission for me—so that squares things, doesn't it?"

"It wasn't that," he said, red with humiliation before his child and in presence of their first real difference. "But it ruined my dreams and all that I ever cared for." This was exaggeration; and exaggeration none the less because he had imposed it upon his own belief and his action. "We should have been happy if I had never left my job."

She went away, to tidy up the day's disordered remnants of duties before changing for dinner. Giving out the tea and sugar for next day, she spoke to herself, addressing her absent father.

"He's a decent boy; and as *straight* as a die. And I've sent him away for *your* sake, my dear. But that's as much as I'll do, even for you, Dad."

For it was not a question of convention or of arrangements that men could make. This boy had met her first through no contrivance of his own, and had sought her out again; he had broken past her dislike of him, by a directness of speech and will as elemental as her own; they had faced the dark and the wilderness together, the forest had seen them companions; and he had played the game. He had a right—Nature's right—to seek to win her, *if he could*. What right had anyone to forbid that right—because of ancient wrongs, however deep, that this boy had not done? That generation's battle, in all essentials, was decided; no one had any right to call the next to fight over again

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quarrels that were already memories. There was no fairness about it. Her loyalty had carried the day against her sense of justice. But that account was settled, there was no balance over.

CHAPTER VI

I

NORMAN went; and Kitty explained things to her own satisfaction, and her lover's. "Nicky's a dreamer. She can't *stand* having anyone round who takes up her time." Presently Kitty went also, for a long stay with Mrs. Dermott. From now on, she was away more often than not; families at Khatra, or scattered throughout the district, were happy to entertain the bride-to-be.

This should have been a content-bringing situation to Nicky and her father. But constraint had settled on their relations. He had mended—not greatly, but sufficiently to be about again, and his fever was merely at its normal intermittency. So he took up his zemindari job once more. It would have been the year's slack season, had not matters fallen into arrears by his illness. Nicky was dutiful—more than dutiful, for there were times

when love pushed past the sense of offended justice and became solicitous as of old. 'But, as she once said, when he brushed aside an objection that a journey was more than he should do, "You've never bothered to listen to me, Dad, though I've talked all the sense you've ever heard since you came here. You went your own way in that rainstorm where you smashed yourself up; I can't expect you to listen now." She rarely accompanied him.

One November evening, their formally friendly after-dinner conversation warmed into something of the old affection. She had been touched by his wistful, frightened eyes following her, and knew they were pleading for more than this competent kindness. He began harking back to earlier days and old companions, and he told her of two men who for five years ran a frontier post, one as police officer, the other as commandant of a handful of Indian troops. Both were good fellows; "but they couldn't hit it off together, and things came to such a pitch that dislike grew into sheer, raving hatred. If ever either came in to Peshawur, he was a bore, for he

could talk of nothing else but the utter caddishness of the other. And I know for a fact that during the last eighteen months before Jackson died, he and Garrett never spoke to each other. If they had anything to say, they said it by chits."

"But—didn't their own servants *know*? Didn't the natives see how things were?"

"Of course they saw. Of course they knew. They know every last thing about us, even the things we think we've kept as secret as the grave, even the things we don't know ourselves."

Yes, she thought; and the Trisulbari servants, and the zemindari tenants, and every chap who drives a bullock-cart along that Pachete road, know that Dad and I are at outs, for all that no one has ever seen us exchange an angry look. But she said, "Why didn't either ask for a transfer?"

"Too silly proud to be beaten. Devgarh was a vile place—head of a burnt-up valley. But each hung on to his hatred so, that when Jackson *was* transferred he sent in a chit begging to have it revoked. It was revoked

right enough—they were only too glad to find a chap willing to stick the place. It killed him three months later—he was dying when he insisted on having his death-sentence confirmed, as you might put it. No, *he* wasn't going to go! Nor was Garrett. It was absurd, the way both stuck to Devgarh—that was why they were there so long, for if transference was suggested (before that, men had worked it in a kind of twelve-month shifts, then clearing off to some chance of sanity), either made it clear that he didn't care about leaving. And those two," he added, musing over memory of many years and many folk, "weren't the only two I've known living on snake-and-mongoose terms. It's a thing that often happens in India."

"*Why* does it happen, Dad?" asked Nicky, with glistening eyes.

"Why, my dear," he said sadly, "you've no choice here. In England you can *select* your pals, you're not bound to chum up with an absolute sweep, if one happens to be a neighbour. But there's no choice here—leastways, no choice, once you get away from

the big stations. And so men get thrown into intimacy by their jobs, who if they had any choice would never spend five minutes in each other's company. It's surprising that things go as well as they generally do."

He fell to thinking of his own quarter of a century—very nearly that now—cheek by jowl with uncongenial companions. He knew they used to call him "the King of the Beasts." He remembered the cold welcomes of the other planters' wives on the occasions when sport or discussion made a gathering of the community. It might have been better, perhaps, if he had forgotten his wrongs and his different past, and had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the life he had undertaken? You fool about with the present, cursing it; and the present has gone. There were decent enough fellows in that planter business; more than one had intended once upon a time to make the Army his own profession or had connections in it now. He need not have been so stiff. What sort of a life and chance had he given Nicky—as he had often said playfully, in the days of their happier

relationship, she was "socially an orphan." She knew neither the Army ladies—none nearer than Calcutta, in any case—nor those of the planting community. This zemindari job was a lone wolf one.

Nicky could endure it no longer. Here were she and her father, compelled to live together, treating each other with a frosted correctitude. She flung her arms round his neck, and cried. "Dad, I *can't* go on like this. We've *got* to be chums, we've *got* to love each other. As we used to do, Dad."

If her father had seen deeper, he would have healed the breach there and then. To do him justice, he never thought that he had done anything more than stay in its very beginning an attachment in which his own child had only the slightest of shares. He had not guessed at the existence of any more dangerous reason for estrangement, striking deeper than his interference; he did not know how far weakness had gone within himself, nor how vivid had been his betrayal of it. What he had taken for proud self-respect she had seen as a silly cherishing of old misery

and a contemptible insistence on injustice now.

Yet for a while matters were friendlier between them.

2

October proved a stormily troublesome time. The Zemindari Company had bought out a Raja who was a weak, drunken fool. Following on failure to persuade his officers, kept in their old positions, to act with some honesty and decency to the tenants, Nicky had sacked them. She expected the people to breathe more freely. But the first result was a crop of threatened lawsuits, not in the Kestanadi estates themselves, but just outside. The rights in a plot that had been bought three years ago, with all title-deeds apparently lawyer-proof, were assailed by a ridiculous Mohammedan widow, who claimed that she held a one-pice share. She was so grotesquely poor that it was obvious that powerful allies financed her. The same thing happened in half a score of other

places, sporadically but with vexing frequency. Lyon had grown cheerful, with the new face that he could turn to his employers, for he and Nicky were pulling the people into some sort of economic prosperity, and returns would improve. He now grew fretful; and, from being fretful, ill again. Nicky, meeting the late chief factor of the Kestanadi Raja and seeing an insolent grin behind his salaam of mock respect, had wild thoughts of inflicting immediate chastisement. Common sense chased the momentary aberration away, and she left him astounded by the sudden laughter that followed on the fierceness of her look.

These Central Indian borders were a lawless district; matters were made easier for a time by an incident in which Nicky was innocent, though the whole populace assumed her to have commanded it, and thought none the worse of her. She had told Hari Singh of her meeting with Charu Babu, and of the peal of laughter with which she had dismissed her despotic inclinations. Next evening Charu Babu was soundly

thrashed by a man wearing the huge ugly mask of the Monkey-God, such as you see when concert-parties tour the country to play the *Ramayana*; the face and form came upon him, enormous in the terrible dusk, like a demon pouncing from the bamboo spinneys that bordered the road. The outrage took place within sight of his village, and very much within hearing of it. He was ducked in a pond, as well as thrashed.

Nicky was vexed, and straitly questioned Hari Singh. Her retainer was all courteous interest and amazement.

"All the same," she apostrophised his form retreating after the interview, "I'm sure you did it, my boy. It was sweet of you—and I've not an ounce of remorse, for Charu Babu deserves all that anyone gives him, and more. But it gets Dad and me a name for *zubberdusti** that we don't quite merit."

She was touched, as well as amused, by the thought that Hari Singh had championed her dignity. Amusement, when it came her way, came grimly and with tears often close.

* Oppression.

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It was ridiculous for her, a girl who could control nothing except by consent and by bluff on her part, to be living this life. Loneliness ceased to be the anodyne it had been, she had learnt that human relations can poison even the sky and earth for you. She thought of Norman. What a good comrade he was, he would stay with you though he did not care about these wilds! She could let the jungles go hang for a time, if she were with him. They were friends, and he was strong and loyal. Her father was weak, and blind to the way things were going.

Lyon's malarial fits were worse. At times they affected his brain, and he talked, even when not delirious, at an unfollowable random. Then he would get up, ill though he might be, and insist on going off on some long jaunt. And always, always, *always*, he was grumbling, returning on his old wrongs, and brooding over what luck and promotions had come the way of men whose equal he had once been. She wondered how she could get him away from this life. Yet what could he do if he left India? Nothing at all. After

forty stick to your groove, if you have no money or influence. In India, he might grow coffee in the Nilgiris—tea there, or in the Himalayas, or Assam. But Nicky knew he had precious little money left after “educating” Kate and her; and he had failed as an independent planter before, and (she knew) would fail again if he tried it. He was the kind of man who was *meant* to be part of a system—he was excellent then, but useless when alone. But something must be done. She could hardly watch him slowly dying here—for this was what it came to.

The notion came to her—was put by, then came again—that she would find a chance to speak to Felvus. The problem was beyond her powers, and she must have help.

3

Remorseful whenever she remembered Helen's reproach that she looked them up only when she wanted something, Nicky managed to find time for one or two entirely

altruistic trips to Stonegunj. The second time, Helen stared at her. "Why on earth have you come, Nicky?"

"Because I want to see more of *you*. Helen, I've never been able to forget what you said."

"What I said?"

"Yes. You said—and it was absolutely fair, my dear; only you don't know how much I've had to do—that I never turned up unless I wanted something."

Helen stared again into Nicky's crimsoned face, then burst into a bitter laugh. "Did I? But why *should* you come unless you had to? What sane person *would* come to this absurd establishment if she could avoid coming? My dear, you were sensible; and you must forget my silly little speech. I expect I was—oh, a little more than usually tired—and weary of the whole business!"

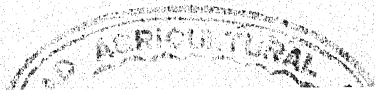
Nicky, nevertheless, came again. But the experiences were not sufficiently exhilarating to make her long for repetition. The vapid garrulity of the three stupider sisters, the alcoholic heartiness of Mr. Stone, the sus-

picious watchfulness of Mrs. Stone—all these were a trial, but they were nothing beside the persistent gallantry of Victor. Victor would walk out to show her this or that, Victor would sit beside her at table, he would be waggishly domineering or offensively familiar. She had to slip away betimes, by collusion with Helen; she hunted for untried jungle paths home, and pondered ways of escape.

And in the very bones of the house was something that depressed. No one has bothered to ask for pity or sympathy for these last years of the century; yet they deserve pity and sympathy, perhaps more genuinely than many noisier epochs. The big political turmoils had not begun, Anglo-India seemed safe and majestic as ever. But the old life was perishing, and it was now that the changes came, and came rapidly, for all their quietness. Indigo was nearly dead, having taken half a century to die, through a long, tossing fever of illness. With its death a large part of the roots of British dominion, as this used to be, was torn out. That

dominion became a more glaringly alien thing than ever, official and military and regional, cantonments and offices perched on frontiers or mountains or segregated in cities, planter communities no longer scattered across the interior but hugging the side and course of Himalayan valleys. To Nicky the shadow of the Destroyer's trident was falling, not only over her own house, lying under his mountain. It lay deepest and darkest here. This corner of dying Anglo-India had entered on its last phase. The master's shouts were even noisier and less coherent, his eyes were set in a steady glaze. Victor should have taken over; but he was incapable of supposing work any part of his duty. He grew more and more the perfect exquisite, paying prolonged visits to Calcutta and the big railway centre at Hamah, visits that in no estimation but his own improved him.

Nicky's last visit to Stonegunj was accidentally timed with Victor's return from one of his forays. He arrived to find her at tiffin with the family; during the meal she dis-



covered in herself the novel and unpleasant feeling that she was now certainly a threatened animal, that must use all its speed and skill if it were to escape a gross but cunning pursuer.

Helen, watching all with hope-free vision, divined the situation, and drew Nicky aside afterwards. "Nicky, you must chuck coming to us. You *must*."

"But, Helen, you said when I came to borrow Ibrahim——"

"I know what I said, my dear. But we can't expect decent people to look us up. It's sweet of you to go out of your way to visit a house that must bore anyone not already crazed out of her senses. Never bother about what I said."

"It isn't that, Helen. It isn't that. I'm not bored, really. I think your father's a dear; and I *want* to see far more of *you*."

"Well, you can't, without seeing a great deal too much of Brother Victor. My dear, you must let me be frank; it's the only thing that two women who are as helpless as we are can do for one another. Victor's a cad,

and we both know it. And he's not in the least afraid of your father—not here, at any rate, for he knows he's ill. You must stay away. I shall understand.”

“You're a brick, Helen!” She added impulsively, “I can't see what you get out of life.”

“Oh, well! That's no reason why *you* should be dragged into our mess.”

4

A good hour before she had engaged to go, Nicky, scanning the horizons and coverts, could find her persecutor nowhere; doubtless he was sleeping. She made an elaborate pretence of walking out with Helen; then doubled back in shadow of trees, to the stables. She saddled up, and was away. When they gathered for tea Victor would find her gone; she would be in safety before he could follow. This was her pleasant train of thought when he burst upon her with boisterous triumph, from a wayside grove.

“So you imagined that Victor Stone

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couldn't see through you, Miss Nicky! Vy you are *too* simple! I *knew* you meant to slip away. So I slipped away first! Seel!"

He was the better mounted, and she cursed herself for coming out on Fanny. But she took to headlong flight, too vexed to parley or try craft. He kept level easily, gleefully shouting; not least of the qualities for which he admired Miss Lyon was her spirit. She had to use her brains; and in mid-career of a crazy rush she flung every ounce of strength and weight back. Fanny's response was tempestuous, but did not rid her of her rider; she was held, and Victor overshot them. Nicky had seen a ribbon of path, such as men make who walk and do not mind having to lift their arms sometimes to worm their bodies on. It would not take her far before she would have to dismount and be caught. But she swung into it, scanning every bush and yard with hunted eyes. When the jungle all but interlocked across her front, she brushed through, reaching a tongue of clear pathway. Over this she hurried Fanny, till the forest swept close again, then hurried

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her back. Her pursuer would see the hoof-prints, but in the blurring of that loose-lying sand might miss her return. Galloping on her tracks, she was nearly too late, she heard Victor riding up as she slipped aside into covert of a sal-copse. The madness of the chase was on him, he was noisily exultant as he urged on his beast; he had flung away every restraint and respect for her that he had ever known. Something of an impersonal excitement as if of a game took hold on her, and she was as eager as her hunter. She all but forgot that she was herself the prize; she and he were two minds matched against each other.

She had already seen what she might do; and, indeed, it was a stratagem that had presented itself to her weeks before, when first the danger had loomed as distantly possible. She had seen how Santals snare the sambhur, in just such a strait as this; and she carried a knife in readiness. She glided out behind Victor, and through the narrows by which she had reached this tiny lane. She jumped down, tied Fanny up by her bridle; then

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wrenched down length after length of the lianas that oversprawled the mimosa bushes. She ran to the narrows again, and went on her knees, roping them across in more than one place and at more than one height, several strands together.

Victor was thundering back. His wits were working better to-day, he had guessed the trick she had played him, he was shouting his disappointment and resolution. Nicky sprang up. Since the first moment when she had turned in here, looking desperately ahead to the moment when she would find the track shut to anything less slim than a flier on foot, her eyes had held a hundred senses. They had noted—one of a wilderness of details all then similarly irrelevant—a stump, whose tree had been taken by some wood-bider for door-post or rafters. Fanny, all fire and frenzied bewilderment, walked round and round it, refusing to stand; the girl had to take what chance she might, springing from a spur that snapped when she kicked it from her, and she found herself flung sack-fashion across a horse preparing to bound

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away as only a thoroughly terrified horse can. She heard a yell, and dreamed of a man diving through the air and somersaulting to earth—of an overturned horse, with all four hoofs waving blindly and haunches straining helplessly where there was nothing to resist them and give their mighty strength effectiveness—of a storm of dust and broken twigs. She was herself being bruised and nearly swept off by trees. She swerved Fanny up against a solid wall of forest, and with peril and difficulty persuaded her of the desirability of a halt till her rider's place was adjusted.

Riding back, she found her snares had been almost too successful. Victor had struggled to his feet, dazed, and was wiping blood and dust from his eyes. He seemed to have blood all over him. What was far worse, that superb horse of his was limping. But she was safe from pursuit.

Only wrath and mortification in her mind, she told him, "You've got off lightly. If you ever come within six miles of Trisulbari, you will know what an arrow feels like. Don't

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presume on what you think I dare do and dare not do."

There was nothing for it, then, from this time on, but to keep to Trisulbari. Where was all the freedom gone, that had been her life to her? She had ranged these forests for years.

It was now fury that came upon her, and every kind of anger. She was furious with the oaf who had mauled her own proud sense of virginity, and had chased her with such loathsome zest and gleefulness. Furious, that he should think he could drag her into such an existence as his. She was furious with her father, who was such a fool, slaying himself with rage and remorse because of old troubles that mattered nothing—tempting Providence daily in the unquiet, silly life he led, as if it could go on for ever, this playing with illness of mind and body—refusing to let her choose friend or mate where she would, and taking advantage of the ties of long companionship between them. She was furious with herself, for having given way to him. Furious with herself, for having been drawn into altercation with Victor, for

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having ridden back to threaten him, and because it was all she could do.

Then, as she allowed Fanny to slow down from the first, unreasoning gallop, and at length to walk—glad of the respite, for the poor thing was blown, but still eager and puzzled and fretting at the rein—anger gave way to depression. All about her, for scores of miles, swept this desolate, oceanic wilderness, broken by only hamlets of alien folk and an occasional planter's bungalow. She supposed her obvious destiny was to become the lady of one of these. It was a poor enough life; but most lives are that. From Victor Stone's point of view, there had been nothing presuming, nothing overbold, in aspiring to court her. He was an indigo-planter's son, she was a zemindari wallah's daughter. And, when the blood mounted into her cheeks at this putting of the case to herself, she saw how exactly, for all her anger against her father, she had all these years adopted his view of their position; she still considered herself a daughter of—Damn those Mianis! And she laughed at

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herself, but with amusement that was almost in tears. Well, she was going to refuse her destiny, father or no father. But no! that wasn't fair to him; he had never wanted her to sink into his own life. But why hadn't he provided some chance to do otherwise? That was the very question Kitty was always asking. And that whole business of husband-hunting had seemed so ignoble and degrading to Nicky.

There was not much of dignity or decency or even kindness in this life man lives. Going back on what had happened, she remembered what to her was not a trivial thing—the sight of Victor's waler, magnificent old Tiger, halting on one fore foot. He was—by all the standards of the splendid class to which he belonged—a ruined horse. He would be lame for long enough, and you would never feel sure of him again, especially in these sun-baked tracks; he might never be any more use. And Fanny—silly, flighty Fanny, who had come from the Gulf and had her brains vexed with memories of swirling desert-*djinns*, as well as fears of these

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multitudinous *bbuts* of India—had been through a storm that was none of her making or understanding—when she was already doing her best, throwing her gallant heart into every stride, whipped into something crazily more than her best and then flung back upon her haunches and turned into a side-track, galloped to and fro, unaccountably halted and tied up to witness another mad horse and human hurled to disaster. Men and women cannot even live their own futile lives without wrecking the peace of the brutes, using up their strength and freedom to harass each other or to drive other brutes to death.

She was within four miles of Trisulbari. She had halted on the way until it was dusking. She was riding slowly along the bank of the Tamravali, now a mere trickle in wide sands; it was a burning-ghat, there were skulls and charred wood and rags everywhere. The place was a sweep of sandy bluffs broken by innumerable rat-holes and scrubbed with thorn-jungle—here and there was a short plat of grass green from the

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periodical floodings and soil tenacious enough to hold moisture still. Vultures strutted on the beach below her; in a disorderly paddock of palas trees a hyena shamled off; quails tottered swiftly away, and into the bush. In a pool a snake stood on end, his eyes skimming the surface for prey; he saw Nicky, he rippled down and was a slightly darker muscle in the water sinking to the mud.

Nicky had to cross; she was halfway through the sands when Fanny shied at a skeleton, and continued to show fright. Nicky, looking for its cause, was aware of the sweet scent of a body burning, and saw, not fifty yards away, a deserted pyre. The mourners had done their duty, they had planted the thorn-stake as hedge between them and the liberated spirit and had gone home. But the flames were still busy, an infinitude of restless flowering, tongues thrusting up and outward, an exultant dance. They were fingers beckoning, snakes that leapt to an invisible flute. To Nicky's mood, against that sombre wall of advancing night

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they were a vision freeing her from fear and anger. Victor's remembered face, all dust and blood and amazement and stupidity, was a theme for laughter, and he took his absurd and unimportant place again. Her father was a sick man, who needed her help and comfort; she herself was a very happy and very trivial girl, who helped to run a jungle zemindari. Men and women had gone home, they were cooking and eating and preparing to sleep, they had disappeared into their holes and left this stretching desolation, where the generation of the men and women who had eaten and slept and loved and quarrelled before them were now bones waiting for the moon to shine upon their whiteness. There was no one here but Nicky; and soon Nicky would be gone, and there would be only hyenas and owls and the night-flying kestrels, that had been rising this half-hour past from her horse's feet and slipping away, slices of darker shadow in the already shadowy air. Last of all, the God Siva, who haunts the burning-ghats, would come wandering along these

banks, his troop of ghosts and goblins chuckling behind their silent Master. He would come to this place, he would put that wisp of crescent moon—it was there, already swimming in a crimson sky, visible behind that mighty simul tree—in his grey, ash-ridden locks, and he would dance his Dance of Destruction. Not in earnest, for when he does that the Three Worlds will shatter and the end will come—but quietly, terribly, as those silent flames danced about the charred body.

On the top of the further bank, Nicky, fascinated, halted to watch the fire. It was a lovely thing, set against the grim sands and dusky eve. Then she hurried home; and made her peace with Fanny, who nuzzled her caressing hands, pleased to know that the day's trouble, whatever it was, was over and done with. Afterwards, the girl made her peace with herself, by going about the duties of the bungalow and making all ready for the next day.

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5

So Nicky ceased her visits, glad of justification in Helen's eyes. Helen came to Trisulbari once or twice; but the ride was longer than she cared for. Late in November, Mrs. Stone died, and all was confusion. Daisy decided to marry an admirer in Calcutta, Angelina went on a long visit to Murshidabad, Mr. Stone wanted to sell out and go to Coonoor. He rode over several times—a difficult and unusual feat for him now—and finally persuaded Lyon to put up to the Samodar Zemindari Company the suggestion that they should buy the business. They were not enthusiastic but did it in the end. But the first attempt was to sell by advertisement. Helen acted as secretary, and one day brought over to Nicky a letter signed Norman Rivers.

“Queer he should be so bent on buying it now, when he cared nothing for it when he was here!” She looked at Nicky keenly. “He

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says he knows the estate, that in his opinion it offers opportunities for interesting development, and that he'll buy it if we can agree on a reasonable price. I wonder if he has any idea what a forsaken and wretched life this jungle planter's is? He must have quarrelled with his colonel."

"Or colonel's daughter," said Nicky impudently. But she borrowed the letter; and, since she did not choose, yet, to keep her actions secret from her father, she showed it him.

He read it, and looked up, to see her watching him with what seemed to his mood a faint cloud of contempt over her face. He began to blaze out. But she checked him. She rose to go, and he stopped midway in his outburst.

"Dad," she told him, "you've no reason for looking at me like that. Nor for speaking to me like that. It was *I* who showed you the letter, which you need never have seen at all. And I don't mind telling you," she added in anger, "that I didn't do it for your sake. I've *done* my duty by you, by sending him

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away. But for Norman's sake. I'm not going to let him ruin his career and imagine that a life of vegetating in the wilderness is enough for an active man, provided he's got the woman he wants to marry."

However justly inflicted, the words came close to cruelty, and showed how stark was the breach between the two friends. But his outward mind saw sense in what she said, and he replied merely, "but of all the infernal cheek in the world! To try to creep in a second time where's he's not wanted!"

"No cheek at all! He's only trying to do what you did—to marry the girl he loves, no matter what it costs or what anyone says. But he's not going to be allowed to buy this white elephant. And to vex all his folk and friends and make himself penniless. He doesn't know a thing about indigo."

By collusion with Helen, the letter was destroyed. Probably the Stones lost thereby; but Norman was the gainer, by the saving of his money and career and by a letter from Nicky.

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DEAR BOY—

I have seen—and have destroyed—your offer to buy Mr. Stone's place. It was a great piece of impertinence, trying to get back like that! However, I won't say it was against the rules of the game.

But *you are not going to be allowed to ruin yourself*. The place isn't worth buying—at any rate, not by *you*! Do you know even the beginnings of indigo-growing? You know that you do not.

NICKY.

When the deal was concluded, Helen came to say good-bye. "Clarisse is going to keep house for Dad," she said. She hesitated, then went on. "I want to tell you, Nicky, that I'm getting married. No, you need not congratulate me. There's not much romance about it."

"It's a sergeant on the grass farms," she told Nicky. "He's a decent fellow, and quite straight. We met at Mussoorie two years back, and he's been wanting to marry me ever since. It's all right, Nicky. I know we

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shall be reasonably happy, which is more than most people are."

Nicky's face still showed perplexity. Helen interpreted part of it. "You think it's a come-down socially. So it is—if you go by what Dad was. But it's no use imagining that we're still in that position. I'm lucky to get a man as good as Jack. I'm not going to fool myself by not looking facts in the face. And I won't pretend that I'm doing anything but choose for my own comfort. I wouldn't do it, though, if I did not firmly believe it was for Jack's as well. I'm *not* going to continue being one of a miscellaneous house like ours, all growing old in—well, the way we *are* growing old. You've seen our house and its ways."

CHAPTER VII

I

KITTY was to be married in February. Khatra would be in festival, and the circuit-house for the time being would be considered the bride's home, where her father would entertain the station. Lyon would go in, unwilling but dutiful, when the time came; for the present, he grumbled, and left it to Nicky to make all arrangements.

Kitty had been continuously away since her brief return to introduce her lover, and was shopping zealously. She accepted an invitation elsewhere for Christmas, an action of which it is hard to say whether it gave her father and sister pleasure or not. Lyon was secretly hurt that she found his home so little attractive at such a season—he cherished abundant sentiment under the demeanour of grievance and disillusion that he had made his duty for so many years. But he and

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Nicky were both glad to realise that Christmas would be quiet and contented. Yet they dreaded being together, at a time when all custom and fitness demand affection and friendliness.

Nicky decided to kill several birds with one stone—to do their Christmas shopping, to set the wedding fuss in train and arrange everything that could be arranged now, and to give herself (and her father) that breathing-space apart which neither had ever needed before but both must have now. So on the 10th she went in to Khatra. She went alone, staying at dak-bungalows and sending on her kit by bullock-cart travelling through the night. The seventy-five miles would take three days; she would be four days in Khatra, staying with friends; and be back five days before Christmas.

It needed but this escape from Trisulbari for her to realise how her spirit had been clamped and confined. She had close on four score miles in front of her, that were the home of wild things and the wilder folk of the forest. The delicious winds of winter

were stirring. Sometimes, for miles at a time, she passed, in the rich, parklike country of these gentle uplands, through a region where the winds seemed the only inhabitants. For here they appeared human—or, at least, personal—will and movement functioning at immortal ease and leisure.

These were not the reckless, golden-vestured storm-gods that the Vedic invaders knew. Those gods Nicky, too, knew well. She had heard them ravaging through many an ecstatic night, when a child, wrapped close against that daemonic army without, had tried to guess what tree of her father's compound had fallen in that sudden, dreadful crash and scream of timbers rent apart. There had been no seclusion from them—the lightning had flashed in, past shut windows and doors, stabbing each nook of darkness into blinding, terrible brightness, making the room about her bed a tank of flame. She had seen her veranda fill with the refugees from that invading dread; and had been abroad afterwards, to count the victims—shattered bodies of sunbird and barbet,

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torn even from their cloaking leaves and tossed down by giant hands. She had known journeys of ineffable glory and horror, when some tempest had swept up unheralded, the Destroying God himself striding out from shelter of mighty Pachete and the three-pronged hill of his worship, to sport with the life of a girl hurrying across some treeless heath. But far more were her memories of experiences nothing worse than sudden envelopment in a sheet of racing rain, that left her drenched but exquisitely cold in her clinging clothes—and madly happy in the sight of the yellow-maned brooks filling the cracks and seams that an hour since had been dry, red scars, and in the glitter of the wet leaves and the sunlight returning. Those tattered flags of cloud, buffeted by the winds that were whirling away from the trampled earth, to cleanse the sky's upper reaches!

But in this infinite leisure of thought and reverie, during her three days' ride, the forest spaces were ranged by winds that you could not think of as storm-gods. They

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were tricky elves and colour-capped pixies. Where an adjacent hamlet had cleared a space of its timber, the ground was a low copse, tipped with a million scarlet spears, the new leaves; the winds were slyly slipping in and out. Nicky pleased herself with the thought that the Old Gods in India, as in Europe, knew a metamorphosis. Diana had become Titania, Zeus and Hera had left Olympus and the thunder-ravaged spires of snowy hills, the whole starry meinie had shrunk into tiny beings who could shelter in a cowslip bell and find a brake-frond a tree stretching into heaven. Odin and Thor had become some kind of "good people," brownies who swept your kitchen and would shoe your horse for you if you left him tethered in the wilderness, with a silver penny by, and did not watch what happened. So here—the Destroyer and the Maruts were the spirits of these chill, delicious breezes, their fingers had nipped the sal-leaves till red blood eclipsed the dusty green. But no! (She corrected her straying, impious thought.) The Wind-Gods, if you like, were

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now these gracious beings, these trivial, harmless, friendly gusts—blowing for a moment out of stillness, and then vanishing again. They stepped behind the trunk from whose shelter they had come so unexpectedly and pleasantly, and with luck you might catch a glimpse of wizened, chaffingly kindly countenance and of peaked, scarlet hat, a wild peacock's feather jaunting at its side. But the Destroyer, said Nicky, could not shrink so. Of the Old Gods he is the one who is still mighty in India. He is the Great God, who meditates or shatters; he is apathy of burning noon or moon-blanced solitude, or horror of famine or tempest. He was here, in that lofty ant-heap, that was a grey face with closed eyes! It was amazing, how often the girl found herself confronted with some sight—a runnel-scarred bare hillside, the flank of a dry watercourse—that was the very apparition of Siva in immemorial trance of thought.

So she travelled, starting in the cool of dawn, when the sky was bustling into colour, flinging up its wintry ruddiness and chill,

frozen golds, when the forest was waiting leaves and then—in a moment—an excitement of tossing movement. She caught the night-wanderers returning; jackal and wolf and fox would be trotting down a glade, one of the innumerable aisles of this forest home of theirs, when they came face to face with her. And it was she who would feel the intruder, guilty of a breach of manners when she saw that her presence made them shy in their own house. But it was only at dawn that she felt herself a stranger; the hours of the long glorious day, in this season of springing winds and abundant shade never too hot for pleasantness, saw her, as they had always seen her—a solitary figure at home in their silences. The few folk she met were wood-bidders like herself; they were hacking fuel or setting snares in the hare-runs. And Nicky—whether pacing these wastes or resting in their trees at noon—watching the sunset glow into a wonder of orange ball and emerald seas, out of its first white calm infinitude—waiting, lonely, for sleep to come, as she lay in the bare room of dak-

bungalow or forsaken indigo-house—had leisure to spring free from the tension of the months that had gone. Why could she not have stayed as she was—stayed so for ever—a creature virginal, untroubled by human ties or yearnings—a girl alone with her father and the wilderness that was mother and comrade and comforter?

She assured herself that she had not loved Norman. The trouble had been made by that savage, remorseless sense of fairness that she inherited from her father. Free herself, she demanded that others should be left free. It was queer and silly and absurd—but she felt that Norman had a *right* to seek her out and to try to change her mood to love for him. Her father was wrong, was a slave such as he had taught her to despise, when he refused this right. What was the difference between society forbidding you to mate where you loved, as it had forbidden him, and a single man forbidding you? Society had said that her mother was not good enough to mix with those it chose (in this ridiculous, provincial world of British India) to con-

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sider its leaders. Her father, revengeful in his turn, said that he would not have in his life those who had sought to restrain him and had punished him when he disobeyed. Norman, he chose to decree, was not good enough for *him*. But what right had others' whims and quarrels in Nicky's life? "Whence came these steps into her field? And why?"

And she longed for Norman now, she felt. He was not carried away by any splendour that might come in earth or woods or sky. And he was *infinitely* patient. He was prepared to stand by, asking nothing till she was prepared to give it. He would not challenge the right of any single thing that already had a place in her heart.

2

Nicky's hostess was a lively little Irish-woman, wife of the Khatra D.S.P. All through this month before Christmas, there was after-dinner dancing at the Club, which Mrs. Sullivan made it clear she had no

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intention of missing. But she assumed that her guest would be too fagged to attend, this evening of her arrival. "You'll be all right, dear, won't you? You'll be wanting to turn in early, after that dreadful journey."

But Nicky meant to go. She had learnt that Felvus was in Khatra, and might be counted on as one of the whist-players who watched the dancing between games. He was another of the several birds she had come in to bag. She must somehow get at his mind concerning her father. Things must change; or there would soon be nothing to change.

Felvus *was* there. He left his table and came to her eagerly.

"In the name of all that's nice and unexpected! Nicky! But I'm not sure that you're not liable for sedition, young lady!"

"But *how*, Mr. Felvus?"

"How? For coming in without notifying the Commissioner, your father's old friend and your own humble admirer, Miss Lyon. How can I be responsible for your safety, if I don't even know that you are negotiating the wilds that lie between us and Trisulbari?"

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Where is your father? Why isn't he here?"

"He hasn't come. I came in by myself."

"By yourself! But I forgot! It's no use scolding you for risking your life!"

"I came in to see about Kitty's wedding."

"Yes, yes. Of course. But just a minute. Promise me you won't make *any* engagement—not even a solitary dance, to any one of those young fellows I see hungrily eyeing you over there—till I come back."

"Why, Mr. Felvus?"

"*Why*, Nicky? Because I won't have any of them annexing you, so that you'll have no time to give *me*."

"There's no fear of that happening. I *want* to talk to you. In fact, that's partly why I came in. But I don't want to take you away from your game, Phelbus Saheb."

"Game be hanged! Do you suppose there's a man alive who'd waste time over a game, if he had a chance of talking to Miss Lyon? I'm going to find a substitute. I shan't be a second."

"I've always had the sense to be more than

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a little in love with you," he told her gaily, as he presently drew up a chair for himself, alongside the one he had found for her. "So you needn't mind letting out anything that's on your mind, Nicky. You'll be gone into some luckier fellow's life for keeps some day; and I don't grudge it him, though I hope he'll be a chap with brains to know how amazingly good his stars have been to him. But you'll not refuse me the right to be you. cavaliere servente for just this evening? I only want to see you, and to hear you speak."

Before ever he saw her, she had seen him, when she first came in. He was watching the earliest dancers, the Club having just begun to fill up. She saw his eyes, with the crow's feet all round them and cheeks furrowed and hair above the temples greying. She thought she had never seen eyes kinder or more radiant. They were smiling at the cheerfulness and activity on which they looked. If there were hints of deeper questioning in them, they were not of things that he allowed to vex him now. Behind these shifting

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scenes—this evening one of a countless procession of evenings that had shone and passed into forgetfulness—there were things a man must confront alone, even then finding no reply. But he was glad, and glad not for himself, the loneliest figure there.

“Before you had spotted me,” she told him, “I was watching you, Phelbus Saheb. I was watching your eyes and the way they looked.”

Her entirely trustful friendliness flooded his mind with delight. Yet (it was unreasonable) delight brought with it a pang. He knew she would not talk so frankly of him and of how he seemed to her, unless she had underscored in her thought the facts that placed him in his relation to her—his age and intimacy with her father.

“I should be sorry for anyone to watch those when I was off my guard,” he said. “I expect they were pretty worried eyes.”

“I like men with worried eyes,” she said quietly. “You see, I’ve lived all my life with one.”

After a few minutes of silence, “Phelbus

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Saheb! I want to talk to you. I've got to have a friend; and I want it to be you. How can I save Dad?"

He understood perfectly. "You can't save him, my dear," he said at last. "He's got to go the full course. He's been on that current so long that he can't drift back. And the worst of it is, it isn't his faults that have done the damage. It's his virtues. He *knows* he's always acted by the highest motives—he has a right to know it; it's true, as it isn't true of another dozen men in India. So, for years now, he has never questioned anything he's done."

"Well?" She was loyal. "Dad *is* the straightest man I ever heard of."

"He is. But you've got to fix in wisdom somehow, as well as straightness. He's got that perfectly damnable sense of fairness. He won't rest, he's simply wretched, when he sees a thing something other than what is rigidly right and just. He won't compromise. But you've *got* to compromise."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do, Nicky. Look at it this

way. What real damage has that wretched quarter-of-a-century-old Miani business done Lyon? None at all. I ran across Colonel Spencer-Rivers—he was the cad who was at the bottom of things—”

“I know, I know. I mean, Dad has mentioned his name.”

“Well, I met him again last summer. He’s a man who’d die with mortification if he once caught a glimpse of himself. But he’ll go to his grave without ever meeting anyone who’ll dare tell him the truth. I’d have to use language none too nice, Nicky, to give you some faint notion of what a blot he is.”

“Hasn’t he a wife? Or any children?”

“A son somewhere—quite a decent boy, they say. He killed his first wife with unhappiness; she was as good a woman as you could find, till he turned her into a dead shell. He’s got a second now, who’s as silly and pompous as himself. But I’m not going to talk about them. Only—why the devil has your Dad fussed and raged all these years, because he wasn’t allowed to turn into a brute like Spencer-Rivers?”

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"But, Mr. Felvus—"

"I know what you're going to say. That your Dad hadn't it in him to turn into that. That's true. But what would he have learnt, had he stayed on, except what he had learnt only too well already—that it was no end of an almighty thing to be a Miani, and that he was a whale of a wonderful fellow!

"Yes, sir." "Very good, Major." "*Bahut accha, saheb.**" "I quite agree with you, sir"—when "sir" had probably been talking some sheer, delirious rot. It's bad enough being any sort of a saheb out here. It's been enough to have turned Miss Lyon's head, being a goddess out in primeval wilderness, adored by a superstitious populace—if she hadn't been exempt from mortal frailties."

She turned her head slowly, to smile her thanks and her pretence of rebuke. With a vividness annihilating time and place, her mother returned in the poise of the perfect head and the lightning of her eyes; returned as when she had come into Felvus' young life, maddening men with her loveliness.

* "Very good, sir."

"Phelbus Saheb! Friends don't flatter one another!"

His mind, straying far back, heard and saw her through a dizziness that made the room's ghostly presences a dream. He recovered the present moment, and saw how infinitely dearer than the woman whose image had supplanted her was this girl, so friendly and gracious in her beauty. "I'm not flattering you, my dear," he said. "I'm only telling you what you have a right to hear from someone. So you shall hear it from a man who can be only a friend of your father and of you. You think you've been just a wild girl helping a sick man to run a zemindari. My dear! if you only knew! You've carried responsibility, and it hasn't added a furrow—not a notch or nick or anything you like to call it—to your fresh, glorious loveliness! You've got to let me say these things, Nicky. It's not for your sake, but for mine! I've got to get them said, simply because they are *true*. The only way we can cleanse our spirits is by praising things that deserve praise. That's why the theologians say it's a duty to praise God—

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not for the Almighty Sultan's sake, but for *ours!*"

Praise had never come her way, as it never comes the way of the flower set in the heart of desolation. Yet the flower's beauty has come through tempest, and if the flower had soul and hearing it would be glad of praise for endurance. Nicky was glad when he saved her from replying.

"I don't know if there's anyone in this universe I *can* thank," said Felvus. "But if there is, I shall thank Him for giving me the chance to tell you one or two things just when you needed to hear them. Don't tell me that isn't now! I know it is. As far as you're concerned, Nicky, everything's absolutely right. A dozen years from now, when you can look back on these days not in a blur but in isolation, one here, another there, you're not going to find much that'll worry you. You've got a deal of happiness in store for you."

"Phelbus Saheb, you're a *dear!* And it makes a difference, your saying what you have. But I want to talk about Dad."

"I can only say what I was saying before—that his absurd sense of justice has wrecked him. If he were a realist, he'd tot both sides up, and see that he's gained more than he's lost. Debit side—various ribbons gone, a colonelcy, a C.I.E., perhaps a K. That's about all—that I can see. Credit side?" He was going to say "Nicky"; but he knew that she guessed his thought, and he would not dim the radiance of her gratitude by bringing it to expression. Instead, he said, "Those heavenly jungles of yours—more dawns and sunsets than any one man has a right to see, shifting and deepening of seasons, the flowers coming on the simul—"

"Oh, I know, I *know*," she cried. "And the way you can journey all day where you can see to the horizon's edge all round you, and never another person—who will bother you, anyway. And you feel that there isn't such a thing as time, but that your spirit will go on for ever."

"I've felt that, too. I think I solidly believe it as well—though I'm not always sure. But I do know that there've been times when I've

been sick almost to death—literal, physical death, Nicky; and yet something outside all this fevered, miserable stuff has taken hold of it and shoved its pains aside and carried it through thought and through action. Now, if I've something in me that can say to the body, 'Here, *you* stand there, and don't presume to vex me with your silly ailments,' do you mean to tell me that this something is so twisted up with Brother Ass that when that hideous creature's head sags forward and his limbs totter it's done for also? It's been the same way in your Dad's experience, too—he'd never have carried on, otherwise. A fool or a wisp of a man goes mad when alone in India. I can believe that *he's* done at death! Or," he added virulently, "a huge puffing bulk like Spencer-Rivers. There's been nothing in him but flesh—ever! Why *should* something else suddenly materialise there, all out of nothing? *Spirit*—out of *that* pompous whale? Never, Nicky!"

They both laughed, and he said, "But what a way to talk to a girl at a dance! I'm sure I apologise, a thousand times; and by

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way of penance I'll consent to hand you over to a livelier companion." For she was about to be claimed by a partner, one of several who had taken the chance of the Commissioner's brief departure when she had first come in. "But I want you to give me to-morrow, Nicky, to come with me to see an old friend."

"I should love it."

"She's the widow of a chap who died forty years ago, when even your Dad and I weren't in India. She's expecting me to-morrow, so I've got to go. But I forgot—it's a longish trip. My dear, you must take the day off, after what you've done these last few days."

"I don't need to, really. I'm as hard as nails."

"I wouldn't suggest it, if I could give you another day. Nicky, is it really all right?"

"Absolutely, Phelbus Saheb. *Please* let me come with you!"

On the ride out to Jograpal, Felvus took up his parable; it was his passion to talk out a

subject, till his own brain was cleared. "Lyon ought to have shed that madness for sheer justice. It's a luxury; and, like other luxuries, wrecks your health. He's been worrying all these years, mainly because what happened wasn't *right*. Not because he lost such a terrible lot by escaping from those absurd Mianis—he's had sense enough to see that it wasn't all loss, I'm sure of that. But because—in the poet's words—what happened was a thing 'what hadn't ought for to be.' "

"Nicky"—a few minutes later.

"Yes, Phelbus Saheb."

"I say, Damn all sense of absolute rightness and justice."

"I say so too, Phelbus Saheb."

But did he say it? Was there a man who raged more, both inwardly and at frequent intervals openly and against his own departments and people, merely because of deeds and words and attitudes that were less than fair? This had brought down his life in failure; yet it persuaded him to carry on, and he would go the same way to the end. There

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are those who persist because they have had a vision of the "Ideas" that live in God's presence—somewhere in this universe, they are assured, is the very source and norm of all that is true and noble; and the things on which man's hasty eyes fall and by which they are rejoiced before death closes them for ever, these get whatever grace is theirs because the "Idea" has found in them some broken or cloaked expression. Felvus *had seen* fairness—absolute, sheer, unbetrayed, uncompromised fairness, as between race and race and individual and individual. And to bring that fairness into human actions he would have died at any moment's notice, quietly and with happiness.

He had not yet got it right. He fell to silent thinking again.

Nicky, too, who had joined him in this outburst of impiety, was prepared to lose even her friendship with her father, because her mind would not admit itself satisfied with a deed of his that was less than just. She could see that in his long persistent flinging away of life for the sake of an old wrong

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Lyon was mistaken. Yet she would not admit that her own attitude was now like his.

But Felvus was puzzling things out. "It's this," he said at last. "That old wrong was done *to him*. I *know*—we both know—that this isn't what worries him. He'd have been just as mad if he had seen it done to another chap. And in that case *it wouldn't have harmed him*. That's it, Nicky. You and I have got it, girl. You have to toss all this pother about abstract justice away when it is a matter that concerns yourself. That's what he should have done."

"You get whole peoples going crazed this fashion," he continued. "If you read history, and of the perfectly vile things that have been done to men by men, you can't keep your wits unless you say to yourself, 'That's all dead and done with. That's all dead and done with. And not a single man living is the least bit responsible for it.' I've known Protestants who can't forgive a Catholic they meet—because of Smithfield and the Inquisition. There was an Irish Catholic who loathed *me*—because of a chap called Oliver

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Cromwell. Yes. And I myself remember reading an account of the Massacre of Amboyna that made me so white-hot with rage that I felt we ought to declare war on Holland and at the end hang a score of Dutchmen as brutally and ignobly as we could. That's how people *did* feel about the thing, a good quarter of a millenium back."

"But I want to *save* Dad, Mr. Felvus. His body at least, even if his mind has gone. And his mind would come right, if he were once well again."

"You've done all that any one person could have done, already."

"Oh, no, I haven't. Phelbus Saheb, what would you say if I told you that for months Dad and I have hardly been on speaking terms?"

He was startled. "I should say the man was a fool, and I would chuck every job I have, to come in and talk him into sense. Nicky, it can't be as bad as that!"

"It is, though."

She told him of Norman. With no change of countenance he made light of her per-

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plexities. "There's a way out, Nicky."

She looked up, questioning. And turned away, her eyes brimming.

"There's a way out," he repeated.

"But how?"

"First, do you love this boy?"

"Yes."

"Then—you know, I was going to say that you ought never to have given this promise."

"I know. But I *have* given it."

"We must get it back."

"We can't. You don't know how that Miani trouble still festers. You don't know how Dad has lived with it till—till—"

"Till he forgets," said Felvus drily, "that there's any other blessed thing in the room. We'll draw his blinds, and make him see some sunlight. It's high time he did."

"But who will do it?" she asked in surprise.

"Why, Norman must."

"I can't let him."

"If he's a man, he won't let you stop him. What's the worst his offended lady can do to him?"

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"I can refuse ever to see his face again. And I would."

"But you're doing that now! He stands to lose nothing by disobeying you, Miss Lyon! If I were in his shoes, I'd take my chance! Tell me one thing more. You're *sure* you love him?"

"No. I'm not. But between him and Dad now I'm miserable. Yes, I do care for him—to some extent, that is. Oh, Phelbus Saheb, I don't *know*!"

"You can know *this*, at any rate. If Norman came back and was absolutely desperately bent on making you care for him, would he succeed?"

"Yes." He hardly caught her voice, it was so low, a faint sigh in her throat.

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"Then he's got to come back."

He dismissed the subject, and talked of trivial things. Then he swung back—but to her father's case.

"You could save Lyon if you could get him out of this life."

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"But how can I?"

"Supposing you *must*? What *is* there for a fellow out here? He retires as soon as he can, or has to—but with a pension or with money that he's saved."

"Dad hasn't either."

"I know. And what's retirement if a man—or woman, I daresay—is alone? Out here we all feel we're somebody, and are doing something. Once we go home, it's different; we're nobodies, in a nation mostly consisting of nobodies. But there's a necessity laid on us to fool ourselves *somehow*, that we still matter. And it isn't easy—except for the insensitive and complacent, who, thank God! seem to be in a decent majority."

He was talking to her in the way that vexed his fellows. It was accepted that impiety and cynicism were the main ingredients of Felvy's talk, which brought small comfort to listeners.

"Nickyl! It's easier, anyhow, *if you're in a community*. You can still keep up the old make-believe. Out here Lyon's a kind of under-king to Queen Nicolette; so *that's*

all right, so far as it goes! But when that finishes? He isn't the man to mix in a community, or to let himself be fooled by any absurdities except his own."

"That's what's worrying me, Phelbus Saheb. He can't stay on as he is—it's just murder. Sooner or later something's bound to snap. But there's nowhere for him to go."

"I'm wanting you to worry about yourself, my dear."

"I'm not going to."

"No, I know you aren't. Not if you can help it. But I'm trying to set your brain where it *can't* help it. The only thinking you'll ever do for yourself is when you're asleep."

"People don't think when they're asleep."

"Oh, don't they? However, let that argument stand over. I want you to look at this fine impressive India of ours—all the generals and colonels and superb talents busied in administration and ruling. Your Dad vexes himself because he isn't one of them, and I'm afraid he'll vex himself to the end. He doesn't see that all our bother to build up what we choose to think are

powerful and imposing personalities is so much nonsense of children in a kindergarten fussing about prize-day recitations. If we matter at all, ultimately, it's because we've found ourselves a definite place in what's just a procession. Lyon matters, my dear, because of *you*—and *for no other reason*. That's *his* place, Nicky. The rest—which includes most of the things he has tormented his wits over—is foolery. But what's the place of the man—or woman, Nicky—who *has* to carry on out here, playing a lone hand? This isn't our country, we don't get roots here."

"Oh, but I have got them," she cried. "I should be homeless anywhere else in the world."

But he ignored her protest. "If one has to play a lone hand, as I have had—well, one has to, and that's all there is to say. But otherwise—Think it out, Nicky."

It may be that she was led to suspect her friend of a subtlety and wisdom greater than

he possessed. It may be that nothing more was in his mind when he asked her to accompany him than the happiness of her company during a dozen miles of jungle ride. But Mrs. Landon helped her to think it out.

Felvus took her to a ramshackle bungalow close to the sands of a river that was now waterless. The approaches closed down the thought in clouds of desolation—there was hardly a tree within sight, except one solitary one that had been lightning-struck and was all scarred and bark-stripped, a great arm lifted protestingly and as if sleeveless from the elbow. A single swallow-tailed kite was perched in its branches, and flapped off slowly ahead of them and across the stream, like an aged frailly-moving servitor to announce their presence. In the scrub of the banks seemed an endless succession of low-flying kestrels, skimming up as they came; in the sands grew fleshy-leaved, milky-sapped shrubs, with bluey-green, ghastly flowers.

"Someone ought to write another *Ode to Melancholy* in this place," said Felvus. "But

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come along, Nicky. I'll show you someone who will make you think of victory, not of melancholy. Except that you won't get the one without the other."

He had told her little of her hostess—only enough to leave the mind prepared and capable of making its own conclusions. When her husband died, Barbara Landon had refused to leave India or give up her husband's work as an indigo-planter. She had lived for fifteen years alone, when Felvus met her. Her only son had died less than ten years ago; and Felvus, whose subordinate he had been—he had been a Civilian—had made it his business to do what he could for the indomitable old woman.

The bungalow was in need of repairs, gutters had gone and in places the roof was through. Everywhere were signs of deep poverty and extreme helplessness. The garden had been little weeded, and the profligacy of a score of Rains had thrown over it a riot and tangle of vegetation. Inside, the house had little furniture, and that little decayed. But the owner received them with

no hint or gesture of apology; it was obviously nothing to her that the years had taken from her, little by little, the possessions that had given her pride and self-sufficiency when she was young. She was beautiful still. No, said Nicky to herself, she was more beautiful than she could ever have been—not even in the young bride could have been such quick expression of the spirit within, dominating the shrunken face.

Nicky was proud of Felvus as she saw with what simple sincerity of friendship he entered into Mrs. Landon's life since they had last met. He himself was *nishkam*, as the Indian sages bid you be—desireless, a mind and will ignoring its once clamant self. He was your friend, and he would serve you; and, beyond you, he saw truth and justice, whose unfaltering lover and servant he was. To these two, who had learnt how many hopes and ambitions and fears you can lay by—because you must—and yet find that you can live on without them, what outside opinion thought mattered little. Nicky did not know that there had been a time when

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people had chattered and talked scandal of this friendship between the promising young civilian and a woman already old.

Mrs. Landon was now over eighty. Her son's old friend was to be her executor, for the little she would leave to a grandchild at school in England. Nicky was silent, awed in presence of the simplicity with which she and Felvus spoke of things which would have to be done; she had not learnt to visualise herself as she would one day be, done with all uses of this body. But now she was watching the detachment with which this woman, in deep poverty and with hardly a tenant or retainer left, arranged all things with fitness, for the time when she herself could do no single thing that she desired. Mrs. Landon in the afternoon walked with them to a knoll where she could point out the disused vats and some fields that she still owned. It was a short distance, but took them through the village. Nicky marvelled that so much of majesty remained to a frame now drooping, and that the folk paid such respect to an alien woman so obviously powerless.

On the return her thought went back to the Stones. Their destiny seemed clear enough. They would all ultimately gravitate to some Anglo-Indian community—there were hundreds such in India—and live among a segregation of their own kind. But she herself could never do this. She could—she slowly envisaged the possibility—live out here to extreme old age, as Mrs. Landon had done. As a sort of Lady Hester Stanhope—for she could not yet reconcile herself to the thought of that dignified dependence on the good will of people who had once served her, that she had just witnessed—yet with power and physical strength waning each year. And die like Lady Hester, with her servants dragging off the carpets to sell, almost under her glazing eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

I

NICKY had journeyed back in a mood betwixt sleep and waking, and had reached Bagherthaba, "The Tiger's Paw," eight miles from home. Here the road ran through a deep cut in lofty earthen walls, mounds of defence made in bow and arrow times, a moat around them. Until the Samodar Company had supplanted him, a zemindar had lived at Bagherthaba with his ragged followers. You could not avoid passing through this deep cut, for the jungle swept up to the road's edges; not jungle sparse and heathy or with frequent glades, but a knotted tangle that nothing human could break through, unless snake-fashion. The cut itself was commanded by stone walls and facings; it led up to an ancient iron gate. The whole approach was covered by slits that could shower down missiles in scores.

In early John Company days this castle—for it was nothing less, thanks to moat and walls, though the house itself was only a rambling stone and brick mansion, built for defence, and defensible, against spears and arrows but useless against anything in the way of artillery—had been occupied by a brigand known as Khepa Bagh, "Mad Tiger." There were tales of the miseries he inflicted on the jungle folk and peasantry within range of his depredations, that made the blood run cold. They showed you still the pit where he kept wealthy prisoners until death or the full tale of their ransom released them. Karait and cobra lurked in its cracks, and it was alleged to harbour a magnificent half-albino cobra, believed to be a thousand years old and to have slain a hundred and nine of the Mad Tiger's victims. Tradition, choosing to be impressive, was gravely exact as to the number.

The spot fascinated Nicky since a child, and she had listened many a time, in gloomy and delightful horror, halting here on a jungle ride, to the wind moaning in the old

slits and in the twisted branches of the broken, ancient groves. At noon the place was still and brooding, as if in trance; but at dusk there was always a wind. The reedy, dying moat would ripple into expression as of a sudden demoniac face; then it would be glass again, but the bamboo thickets that climbed the mounded sides would be shaking violently. Then they, too, would be still, but from far within came the low, stifled wail of agonies waking again, after a century of sleep.

Nicky, fallen into sudden reverie, started to hear the dead walls address her from above. "Miss Saheb," they breathed. She recovered herself, and—sure that she had been fooled by some hallucination, or (it was possible, and had happened before) by something dreamt in a momentary fit of sheer slumber while riding—looked about her. She saw the alcove above the ancient gate crowded with faces that she knew; other faces were at arrow-slits, men with spears and lathis were walking on the mound. Hari Singh appeared to be in

command; it was he that had addressed her. All the faces were wreathed in the friendliest of grins, ingratiating and respectfully intimate.

"Miss Saheb," said Hari Singh again.

And Nicky, startled out of depths of silent reflection and aware that for the last half mile she had journeyed without any vestige of privacy—through what she had taken to be the loneliest and most desolate of jungles, which indeed it normally was—lost her temper. She had done nothing she need have been vexed at their seeing. But, before those battlements rebuked it, she had passed through a mood of gaiety, beheading the tall yellow thistles, and close to the gate had challenged herself to flick off a particularly sturdy one in three flicks, taken leisurely and (by arrangement with herself) by a stroke outward from the breast and against the proper arm-sweep; she had had a fit of what must have seemed irrational laughter, remembering—in going over the story of her knowledge of Norman—those absurd dogs in that absurd household of the absurd

Stones. She had a great sense of her dignity and of the awe—affectionate, easy, perfectly frank, but nevertheless awe, as to an affable mountain-goddess condescending to chat with shepherds—due to her. It was not pleasant to think of a dozen pairs of eyes absorbedly watching every incident of a progress that (she now felt) had been packed with incidents more suggestive of a schoolgirl alone in a lane and thinking of “what an awful wax Miss Melsom was in this morning,” than of a princess returning.

“Stop grinning like a monkey,” she told Hari Singh, “and come down at once and tell me why you are all playing the fool here.”

He scurried down; the smiling faces grew grave.

She was now vexed with herself—for being vexed. But the blame still rested with that incautious girl who had sauntered so undignifiedly hither. “You little imbecile, Miss Nicolette.” She repeated the rebuke—there was time, as Hari Singh clattered down ancient stairs and came through the gate—and felt better.

You cannot apologise to a Bengali servant and continue to speak correct Bengali. But you can glance severely at yourself, which serves as well. "I was startled," she told him—and loudly, so that all who had heard him addressed as one who was grinning like a monkey might be witnesses also of how the Miss Saheb blamed herself for the opprobrious words and thereby withdrew them. "I did not see thee, and thought it was a *bhut* that spoke."

The explanation was sufficient. *Bhuts* are *bhuts*, and they are everywhere, seeking to break into human life. If a *bhut* addresses you, you are entitled to have the scare of your life, even if you are a Miss Saheb; in fact, *especially* if you are a Miss Saheb, for it is well known that *bhuts* rarely meddle with Miss Sahebs. Nicky laughed; and they laughed; Hari Singh, whose honour had been smirched in the eyes of these others, accepted the amend with stately amusement. The status quo was restored.

"But what has happened?" asked Nicky.

"We have orders to wait for a saheb, who must not be allowed to pass."

"A saheb? Who must not be allowed to pass?"

"Assuredly. It is an order. If he persists, we are to show him our lathis and bows and arrows. If he goes back and brings his own lathials, we are to fight them." Hari Singh's eyes shone, as he emphasised and lingered on each word of his welcome instructions. He was finding life good.

More bewildered than ever in her life, Nicky found questioning useless. She was not a person to waste time in talking when confronted with minds fogged and destitute of information. Moreover, Hari Singh, when the whole chattering happy mob of his platoon had tumbled down to escort her and to repeat noisily the nothing that they knew, had lowered his voice to say, "I would have a word with you alone." She went quickly through the gate, to a point a few yards beyond and he followed, to tell her "It would be well if the Miss Saheb saw to the Saheb."

Her heart stood still. "What is the matter, Hari Singh?"

"His mind has gone altogether bad."

This was no news. It had done that before Nicky remembered.

Hari Singh saw her impatience; and he was enough apart from the folk among whom he lived to have learnt that pausing over every detail of unwelcome tidings and imparting each with grave deliberate "economy" is a practice intolerable to the European when things are really desperate. "The Saheb has had some bad word from the Kompani"—the Samodar Company—"which is why we have orders to forbid any saheb to pass. His mind is troubled, Miss Saheb. It were well to see to him."

She had heard enough, and was prepared to fly. He detained her to whisper, "There is a *bangama*"—which means riot and disturbance, and may mean as much as rebellion—"stirring among the Santals. This is not a time for saheb to fight with saheb." He spoke reluctantly; yet perhaps his deprecation was rather that of the man compelled to pursue a course he considers good, but not so good as an alternative course that is opening up.

"But your father will not believe what I say."
She raced home.

2

At Trisulbari fresh amazement awaited her. Her father, hearing the dash of hoofs, had come to the front veranda and was standing there, gun in hand. She sprang down, and left Diamond to make his own way to the stables and the syce coming to take him over.

The first thing obvious was that Lyon had been drinking. This was more than an unusual occurrence, it was a portent; very rarely, in a lifetime marked by almost abstemiousness, had he let himself go in this direction, and it had always been a sign of his mind far sunk in pessimism. His face was flushed, and his hands twitched upon the gun. But she saw from the look of ashamed gladness in his eyes that she could control him, if she took hold quickly.

"Dad," she cried, "you've been getting

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malaria again. You must get to bed at once. Your forehead is as hot as a furnace."

He wanted to talk; she could see that his mind was wrestling with some wrong that had become madness.

"I will not listen to a word," she told him, "till you are in bed, and fit to talk. Bhim!" She called his bearer.

"You don't know," he began. "I can't go to bed. I've got to be here to shoot that damned—"

"I know, Dad, that there's some *filthy* trouble that's turned up. But it'll have to be bad for us two—Dad, remember, dear, how we two have stuck together all these years—"

He let her guide him; he was listening to her voice, hearing a music to which he had shut his ears during the past unhappy weeks.

"It'll have to be bad, darling, for us two not to be able to find a way out from it. But you must get to bed, and be looked after. *Yes!* before I listen to a word!"

And, indeed, it was time that she took over. He had been drinking beyond his wont, truly; but it was not drink, but fever and

physical frailty—perhaps more than all, it was his mind bewildered, angry, and broken—that had brought him to this condition. He had been under great strain, sleepless and with a raging tempest in his brain; under her care he relaxed into a weary child, and fell asleep. But he had dropped incoherent hints of the trouble that had come upon him, and pointed to his mail. Nicky soothed him with promise to run through it, and bore the letters off.

The first of these she put by, after a glance; it was plainly a detail, and not the main plot that mattered. It was an apologetic note from a man called Anstruther, of whom she knew vaguely that he was in the zemindari company's employ; he expected to arrive the day before Christmas, and had at least the decency to know that it was monstrous for an uninvited guest to be planted on the Lyons on that date. But he had his orders. Nicky turned to the letter which gave these, which was from the zemindari company itself. She read it, and was dazed with the excess of wretchedness

that came. Coldly the company informed her father that the management of the Trisulbari property had given grave dissatisfaction for years past; with a great parade of their generosity, they were not taking the step of compulsorily retiring him—they realised that this would put him in a position of exceptional difficulty, with his ill health, and two young daughters to provide for—but were transferring him to an under-manager-ship of an Assam tea-plantation. As he probably knew, they had recently been buying extensively in the tea business, both gardens and factories; he had had previous experience of running a garden—and, in any case, the Trisulbari estates needed a younger and more vigorous man. They had appointed Mr. Duncan Anstruther to take his place, and were sending him almost immediately; he would live with Mr. Lyon for two months while the transfer was being made and he was being shown over the estates whose charge he had undertaken.

How long Nicky sat, too dazed for clear thought or any feeling except misery and

hopelessness, she never knew. She had started early after her mid-day halt, and had reached The Tiger's Paw soon after three; the last eight miles to Trisulbari she had covered at a dash, so she must have read the letters before half-past four. But it was not until her bearer came and, respectfully salaaming, told her dinner was ready that she woke to the outside world. Other servants had come and gone, not daring to speak to her. Ill news travels fast, and there was no one in the Trisulbari compound who had not a very fair knowledge of the blow that had fallen.

While at dinner she heard her father calling. She heard him tell his bearer to bring him a peg; and countermanded the order. She went to his room.

"Dad, you can't have a peg. You've too much fever."

"It's the only thing that's kept me from going out of my wits these three days," he replied.

"It's the thing that's nearly driven you out of them. No, dear, I know that's not

fair; and not *true*. But it won't help unless you get better."

"Nicky, have you read those letters?"

"I have. Dad, darling, I think it's too horrible for words. But we've got to face it together. We shall find a way out, dear."

"What way out? What way for old John Lyon, who's just a malaria-trap and hasn't a friend in the world? There's only suicide. But I've made up my mind. If that kid Anstruther—or any other man they have the cheek to send—wants to take over this job, he does it over my dead body. And that won't be yet. They'll have to send troops to fetch me out, if they want to fetch me."

He was speaking wildly, his eyes red with anger and his cheeks hot.

"It's a damned lie," he went on, "about the zemindari being badly run here. It hasn't been badly run. It's been magnificently run; they wouldn't get a fellow to run it better."

"That's true, dear; and I know it. And others know it too."

"*Who* knows it? Who remembers a man

when he's tossed away in a God-forsaken hole like this to rot to death?"

"Felvus knows it."

"Felvus! What does Felvus know?"

"He knows that you're the straightest man that ever stepped," she said softly and proudly. "He has said so. And *I* know it."

The sick man smiled, as he held up a hand to caress her face. Then the smile went out in blackness.

"I could stand it if I were alone. Yes, I'd go to Assam and serve under some cocky little pup fresh from England, who didn't know the first thing about tea. And I'd swallow my pride—I, J. C. L., who've been doing zemindari all these years, and am now not considered good enough for that! But it's for your sake that I'm worried, Nicky. Nicky, if I'd known what I was going to bring you to—my dear, if I'd *guessed*, I'd have blown my brains out long ago."

"And what good would that have done? Dad, you're talking melodrama—and I thought you had more sense! And what *have* you brought me to, if it comes to that? I've

had a perfectly *heavenly* time, if ever any girl had. Do you think I shan't stay grateful to you as long as I live? Mr. Felvus—"

"He's all right," he said bitterly. "He's in the snuggest of jobs, a gentleman working with gentlemen. It doesn't matter to him what anyone says or thinks. He hasn't had to slave for a lot of Scotch thieves."

"Dad, we're Scotch ourselves."

"I know. And so are the best fellows in the world. And so," he said, getting excited again, "are the biggest rogues and cads in the world. And what do they *mean*—what in the name of all that is vile and shabby in Hell do they *mean*—by saying that this job has been run unsatisfactorily for years past? It was a dead loss when I took it over. You know that, Nicky."

"My dear, you need never mind *that*. We know what they mean. They mean that you've run it decently, instead of making the district like a nightmare to the poor folk you found in it."

"Yes, I know. That *is* just what they mean. That hound of a Macpherson fellow, when

he came snooping round here eighteen months ago—pretended he was on a shoot; he was spying, really—said as much. They mean that I haven't lied and robbed and cheated right and left—that I haven't terrorised the people almost out of their lives—that I haven't bribed chaps to forge and bear false witness. *That's* what they mean."

Lyon was right. It *was*, substantially, what his employers meant. Another of the periodic storms that swept over the planting and zemindari industries, like the cyclones and earthquakes that during the same half-century devastated the land at steady intervals, was blowing up. The zemindari job could bring in respectable returns, when run with honesty and reasonableness. But it brought in larger and quicker returns, when run otherwise. There were various ways of fleecing the tenant. You could force him to accept an assessment that you made in a bumper year—if his was a tenancy under an agreement by which you took a proportion of his crop by way of rent. The return in a

year when rain and sun had been alike propitious was assumed as the norm, and the same gross landlord's share was demanded and enforced in a famine year. Or, to enhance the rent, you trumped up a complaint, and gave his land to another; this might be illegal, but ryots had not yet learnt to be as litigious as they now are, even (or especially) against a European. There were other methods of oppression and of lining your pockets. You might compel villages to grow the crops *you* preferred, against their will; thus, great tracts had been laid down in indigo and opium, when these were profitable, and the cultivators paid a price which was starvation. Planters had kept *lathials*, retainers armed with cudgels, who beat the recalcitrant or burned their huts about their ears. Lyon had done none of these things, partly because he was what his daughter averred, a man with an almost morbid sense of fairness and straightness, partly because he was altogether too proud to sink into a kind of slavish demon tormenting under orders from Cal-

cutta. He had been hasty in temper and often in deed, but had been essentially just; the Trisulbari estates were cultivated by a reasonably contented people, and yielded a revenue that compared well with what was got elsewhere by other methods. It is true that they paid their way mainly because one man was employed alone to supervise a territory quite beyond his powers. But they had been a bad loss before his time, and he was right in maintaining that his ways were policy as well as justice. His folk were a jungle folk—in parts, they were actually Santals, hunters turned farmers, an amazing metamorphosis—and they would have flung off an irksome yoke, and have disappeared. “They’re still genuinely feral in their minds,” Nicky once observed. “For two pins, Dad, they’d fly off to their jungles again.”

The present storm-centre was these very Assam estates to which the Company proposed to transfer Lyon. The troubles here were labour troubles, not those of the planters of the plains. The country had been recently opened up, and had not built up the

tradition of efficient administration of the tea-gardens under the Himalayas. To a district so remote and with a climate so steaming with its prodigious rains, it was hard to entice your labour, and harder still to keep it; the man who had sunk his capital in a plantation had plenty to depress and exasperate him. So "coolie-catchers" sat in populous centres of Bengal, like spiders at the heart of webs, and prowled distressed districts whenever famine or flood occurred. Even so, coolies were not easy to catch, and the cost of transporting each to Assam worked out at something like £10, a figure which owes much to a high rate of mortality in those caught. Wages were less than two shillings a week, and breach of contract was a penal offence, this fact a concession to the planter's helplessness in face of the slippery nature of his catch. The concession stabbed fitfully at the conscience of Government. Just now a fury was beating up that was already not incomparable with the passions of the Indigo agitation of forty years earlier, when Canning had written, "I felt that a shot

fired in anger or fear by one foolish planter might put every factory in Lower Bengal in flames." The European side of the agitation had found a hero, in the person of a half-caste planter who had forged contracts with coolies, had been acquitted in the face of proof, ordered for retrial and finally sent to jail for a month. The English press had magnified this martyr, and the exacerbation had spread throughout the whole planter and zemindari work community. In Assam itself, open war had been declared between the planters and the ruler of the province; the long incubation was over, and the trouble was full-fledged.

Lyon, like his fellows, was bitter with the interfering civilians. But he knew well how much oppression had been at work, and he was free from illusions as to the sorry character of the protagonist his community had found. He had refused to contribute to the fund being raised for their hero by the Europeans of Calcutta, and had been tactless enough to answer criticism of his refusal by drawing attention to the scanty support that

the subscription lists received in the hero's own district. His pride was offended both by the strictures of the administration officers and by the thought that he and his fellows were brought to battle to cover the rogueries of a low-class ruffian. Assam was the last place to which he would have consented to be sent. He was now too old, and too enfeebled by illness, to fight against a system; and it would be a disgrace he could never forget, to be one of a community who had bungled their business so. So he had replied by rebellion; he had improvised his own band of lathials, and sent them to keep his marches. The traditional sport of these uplands was lathi-play, and its inhabitants in the time of the old Hindu kings had been as famous for their lathi-fighting as ever Cumberland for its wrestling. Nothing but firearms was likely to get an invader past The Tiger's Paw.

"I'll be shot before I go to Assam," he told Nicky. "Those fools have got themselves into their ungodly mess, and they can get themselves out without lugging in outsiders

who've shown more sense. I know what running a tea-garden's like, at the best of times. And I know what it's like in Assam. Nicky," he shouted, rising in his bed, almost insane with anger, "if they send anyone to clear me out I'll shoot him with my own hands. I would count it God's service to put a bullet into Sandy MacQueen. But he'll be too big a funk to come himself."

Lyon's doom had fallen on many of his fellows. Indigo-planters who had been close (they thought) to comfortable retirement found themselves in these years suddenly reduced to beggary; instead of the long easy close of life that they had imagined for themselves in some English countryside, they remained in India, subordinate officers of the very estates that they had once owned. It was only syndicates with plenty of capital that could take over the rapidly falling derelict business and tide over the time of transition to something economically stable. Lyon had not been an indigo-planter; but the Samodar Zemindari Company had bought up so many planters for a song and

in many cases given the planters themselves employment, that they were coming to look on any white man anywhere as merely a potential "hand," a tool that was daily growing cheaper and more of a mechanism, not a person to be treated with consideration. Lyon's unpopularity and alleged stand-offishness had worked their part of prejudice; he had few friends, and his rigid independence and refusal to adopt methods he held to be mean and unfair were regarded with impatience.

3

Next morning, fever or no fever, he was up; and his daughter had to recognise that it was better so. You could hardly expect a man, however ill, to acquiesce in inaction at such a time of torment. He found that Nicky had highhandedly taken apart the entire drink supply of the household and smashed the bottles in a pit. To her father's protest she had replied, "Emergency measures, Dad. I *know* you're not a hard drinker—haven't I

lived with you all these years? But we're in a perfectly horrible hole, my dear. You won't listen to me when I tell you about this Santal trouble. But it's beating up, and we're in for it. I'm not going to risk having our servants drinking, just when we may need every man sober. You *know* that you can't prevent them taking the stuff—your bearer's got a taste for it, so has mine. And you remember that a fortnight ago Hari Singh (of all people!) was dead drunk just when I wanted him to go with me to Kamaldanga.”

Lyon might have answered that there was no lack of opportunity to obtain the even deadlier jungle tipples. But to his excited but now saner mind her reasoning carried conviction. His senses were returning, and he was waking up to some semblance of the old energy and clarity of purpose.

For there was no shutting your mind now to knowledge of the wilderness stirring. All day long, like a rim of steady thunder, rose the drum-drum-drumming. This was not the season of the great autumnal *parab* (festival), when if you are at the drowsy centre of the

circuit whose dwellers crowd in you can realise something of the gradual arousal of the tiger to whose lair the beaters are stepping. *Then* you hear the drums muffled by far distance at dawn, and through the waxing and waning heat the roll flows inward, from the entire round of the horizon—until the full moon rises on a dusky crescent moon below, of the jungle women dancing through the brilliant night. Their hair, a cloud of jet-black, is adorned fantastically with green sprays and the feathers of wild peacocks. A double line of men, with huge nodding plumes on their crests and with drums strapped across their bellies, execute a solemn cake-walk, head and shoulders flung far back. That it may be the more impressive, the cake-walk is combined with a bow-legged waddle, and from time to time a man springs aloft from his prancing with a yell. At right angles to these leaders are the feminine half-moons, two, sometimes three, crescents; their hands are linked, and they take tiny steps forward and then dance to the right, in a movement of exquisite rhythm

and beauty, with shrill brief bursts of singing. All night long goes on the drumming of the massed revellers who have been pacing in slowly through the day, some from a distance of many leagues. It reaches its height when the moon hangs straightly overhead, and dies down as the revelry lessens, its performers slipping aside for sleep or love.

Nicky knew this annual *tamasha*, for the rendezvous was in a broad glade not two miles away. She had returned from England, last year, a week before it fell, and had gone to it with her father, standing out with him, fascinated, till there were hints of dawn. The moon was paling and slipping down and aside, while still the dancers swayed round and against them. The wild scene and its colours were imprinted on her brain. She could see the wilderness broken by this open space where men and women thronged like ants; their heads were adorned with flowers, real and artificial, with leaves and tinted paper. Some bore wands of peacock-plumes, or thyrses of sal or maize or "anything green

that grew out of the mould"; others poised burning phalaricas, scattering sparks, or brandished pots of fire. Peacocks, Nicky knew, danced in the forest; the dance that swept its devious tides about her seemed to have been learnt from the wild things of the jungle.

She had memories of the drumming that went far back into childhood. Year after year she had heard the jungle throbbing, as if its slumbering heart had awakened. It was throbbing now, with that slow-snarling clamour, rising and falling, first in what seemed infinite distance, then answered by a drumming close at hand. As though the solitude were growing into consciousness of itself and musing on inchoate plans of evil! This was not the vague delicious excitement of the *parab* season, it hung round her menacingly. You must feel so in a haunted house, where the air is the lurking-place of cruelties that can strike at you but cannot be struck back. She visualised the jungle, that had so long been her friend, a comrade she had trusted at all hours, as a tiger of terrify-

ingly vast size and might, yawning after deep sleep and stretching out a paw to shake it free of the drowsiness still in those enormous muscles.

She knew these jungle people—a simple, kindly folk, almost dwarfs and black as polished coal, traversers of paths that to civilised eyes were no paths, gazers who could detect a motionless panther where she, Nicky, could see only a mottle that was one with the variegation of sun and shadow and leaf and branch. She had met them a thousand times; they paused, hand outstretched to their tall bows, to watch her ride by; she had moved a tribe to joyous, condescending laughter by her attempts to wield a bow which a Santal girl, almost a baby, had then taken from her, to show, amid renewed delight, how hard and how far an arrow could be shot. Some of them, taking to tillage of the earth that provided wild berries and shelter for the fleeing things that were their quarry, were the zemindari's tenants. They were an altogether lovely people. But they were stupid. They were

always falling victims to the wiles of their more sophisticated neighbours. The money-lender was getting possession of their land and few cattle and, in the end, their labour. And once in a long space they became enraged with a savage blood-lust, and slew indiscriminately all who came in their way. There had been such a blood-lust in this very district, not forty years before, when they had marched on Calcutta, reinforced as they went by Santals from other districts. They had not reached Calcutta, but they had slain the officers sent to argue with them, had slain and looted Hindu settlements—until civilised and efficient massacre had supervened, as always on discontent in India, and they had been shot down in their thousands. Nicky knew the tale; there were plenty of people round Trisulbari who dated events, as in an era, from the time when the Santals rebelled. She was sick with fear of the horror of butchery in which the trouble would end. But before that she and her father might find a tide of madness engulfing them, their possessions, and their very lives.

NIGHT FALLS ON SIVA'S HILL

All day long she listened anxiously, revolving plans and dismissing all, realising how helpless they were, she and her father. But he was awake to the danger at last. The house was obviously indefensible, with that muffling wilderness sweeping almost to its eaves. But it would not be necessary for the enemy—they must already think of the folk as potentially such—to attack. Fire was the foe; Lyon remembered the story of the indigo riots, when factory after factory had gone down in flames. Fire is the peasants' artillery and musketry both, and in Bengal most of all. The woods were densely carpeted with dry leaves, and this was the windless season when Lyon burned his garden, to get a finer growth of the bamboos he used so largely. In some years the hill itself was fired; Nicky had known what it was to live in shadow of a grand volcano, a thick belt of smoke all day and all night, shot with tongues of mighty flame, darting out like serpents in agony. You were careful then to have a naked space round house and stables; and you watched the beginnings of the fire, lit close to the

bungalow, with eyes skinned for a hint of danger. You chose a windless time as if with prayer. If others fired your woods from outside, at an hour when a strong wind drove the danger in upon you—if this happened after a pile of sticks, soaked with gums and resins, had been flung down against the house—you would be trapped, and the whole forest, not dead wood and leaves alone, would flare to destruction. There was no need to imagine deep hatred as such an action's cause; mere excitement would serve, especially such excitement as stirs in a bewildered mob blindly moving to no goal, dumbly aware of no aim except to find relief for the discontent that oppresses it.

So Lyon selected a tumbledown but still roofed hut of three rooms, built on a spur of Trisul at the time when quarrying was in full swing. It was not ideal, but in this weather it would serve; and it was in a space free of brushwood. He set locks on doors and windows, and had a sufficiency of food and blankets taken in. But he was too wise to leave the bungalow yet; he would not

go until the very moment of utter need was present. Nicky, seeing the alert and confident way in which he was going about his business—the clear, keen, kindly watchfulness that veiled his anxiety—the sense of the demand that danger was making on him, a sense that drove down the clamorous weakness of his fever-riddled body—knew why she had loved this man.

They had almost forgotten the guard he had set at The Tiger's Paw. The evening after Nicky arrived, Hari Singh—now acting as liaison officer between centre and outposts—reported that there was a saheb seeking to come to Trisulbari but forbidden admittance,

“A saheb?” said Nicky. “Dad, he *can't* have come yet. It was infernal cheek, his proposing to spoil our Christmas by coming on the 24th. But this is only the 21st.”

Her father demanded to know more. But Hari Singh merely knew what the messenger had told him. A saheb had arrived, and was being held up, like an ambassador at the gates of a hostile realm. A pretty tale to be carried to the Zemindari Company, when

this trouble was over! Lyon might surmount the present crisis, but he would hardly get over the tidings that he regarded Trisulbari and its environs as his private estate, to be kept against his employers by a band of ruffians hired out of their own revenues!

Nicky raced out to see; and laughed at the comedy of it all, when she found that Felvus was the ambassador who had been told to cool his heels at their frontier. He regarded her with mock disapproval.

"I found you out in treason once before, young lady. What have you to say now? The Divisional Commissioner—the Empress's highest and most august representative throughout this turbulent region—coming to visit the Trisulbari baron is held up by a gang of *appalling* ruffians——"

"Oh, Phelbus Saheb! They're the nicest men, really, when you once get to know them!"

"I don't want to get to know them, thank you. Their society during the last three hours has been quite sufficient to last me for some time. The gentleman who first arrested me—

he's over there, diligently chewing betel—has scars enough on his face to get him a dozen years' gaol, without any other evidence, if he were ever accused in a riot."

"Why, how unjust and prejudiced you are! That's dear old Kedarnath——"

"I've no doubt! But don't think you're going to carry it off by leading me into by-paths. The question at issue isn't their ruffianliness—though that's sufficiently striking. For the sake of argument, we'll admit they're as nice-featured and nice-mannered a set of cut-throats as you could collect. But by what right do you and your high-handed parent treat this as your private kingdom, and forbid the Empress's representative to enter? Answer me *that*. Now!"

"Phelbus Saheb, if you'd only let Dad *know* you were going to visit us!"

"I see. You want to say that you are good enough to regard me as welcome in my private capacity."

"More welcome than any man in all the world, Phelbus Saheb. If you'd only let us *know*——"

"But in my official capacity to be barred a single step within what you choose to set as your boundary! If Her Majesty Queen Victoria came—God bless her!—I suppose she'd have to wait till Queen Nicolette found time to come out and examine her passports? Then, and then only, she might cross the frontier of Lyonnessel"

"Oh, no. There was no order about refusing to admit mem-sahibs. Dad and I," she said, fooling grandiloquently, "do not war against women."

"And all these years I've been maintaining that John Carmichael Lyon wasn't like some other planter fellows that I've known only too well! And then I take him by surprise, and find that he's been keeping his own lathials out of sight all the time!"

"Well, come with me, Phelbus Saheb. And I'll explain *everything*."

4

He was almost speechless with indignation when he learned what had happened. "If it's to come to a fight again with these

planter and zemindari people, they can have it," he said. "I've had my eye on this Samodar Company for some time. But I knew your Dad was the straightest chap that ever ran a crooked job. Oh, I know, I *know*, Nicky," he said, anticipating her protest. "I know you *needn't* be a mixture of thief and torturer's assistant, to run a zemindari. But I know how the job's run, only too often." Felvus was perhaps prejudiced; he had had some unfortunate experiences.

"Dad says they're sacking him because he has always refused to run the job as they want it run."

"I've no doubt he's right. They think all this stuff about leaving folk free to sell their labour or to refuse it, free to grow crops for themselves or for the almighty saheb, as they themselves *choose*, is sentimentalism and rot, if not downright sedition. But I'll down them, if it means that I'm broken and got rid of. I've no ties or worries except my own job and my conscience. A man in my position is about as dangerous a man as you *could* have as an enemy!"

"He's as magnificent a man as you could have as a friend," she said, her eyes suffused with gratitude. It was easier to imagine victory as possible, with Felvus here. Last evening she had sat silent with excess of misery, staring out dry-eyed until the massing night outfaced her, at the soft, warm, muffling wilderness that had been her home and the nurse of her dreams. She must leave all this, and she was homeless as to the world outside. She had marvelled that she could ever have been blind to the precarious nature of her tenure here, where she had always assumed that she would live for ever, never growing old or dissatisfied. She had felt no illusions as to the upshot of their battle now with her father's employers. She and he might—if it lay anywhere within the extreme border of possibility, she was resolute that they would—obtain a rescinding of the transfer order. But it would be only for a time, till he was compulsorily retired or his health broke down completely. She had felt beaten, and lonely, and friendless. But Felvus had come. She could not doubt—no one in

all India could, for his record lay open to the world—his courage, his staunchness, his disregard of self or of anything but principle. The odds seemed against him, but his power was tremendous, especially in a service crowded with men sufficiently lazy to be willing to shirk a fight. More to the point was the fact that he was Commissioner, and could set on foot at once enquiries that would be unpleasant to the Company. He was no fool, that he should be unaware of the way they had been carrying affairs in other districts of the zemindari; he had proved before his immense skill and patience in getting evidence. If exasperation were to stiffen the Government in their troubles with the Assam planters, they might—out of sheer unwilling perception that the battle was joined on a double frontier, and must be waged to victory here, as there—support Felvus against the Company. He might, in any case, play his cards so well that they *must* support him, whether they wished or not. He was vaguely feared, as a man known to be both wary and obstinate in

his crabbed, queer notions of right and wrong.

However all this might be, he came as a reinforcement when they felt forsaken. The inflowing of confidence and cheerfulness with his presence was immense. When he said that he would fight this thing to the end for Lyon, they knew that what from another might have been an idle but generous expression of sympathy was in him an oath to make their cause *his* cause and to link his own greater fortune with theirs.

"We'll leave the personal clean out of the matter," he said. "We've got to get the whole of this zemindari and planter mess cleaned up. I *know*—as surely as I know that there's a sun in heaven—that MacQueen is clearing you out for no other reason than that you won't be just a tool to run things in *his* way. And his way's a vile way. I know all about it. I'm not going to have the roots planted in *my* division of a tree that's growing to fruit into wholesale misery and very likely rebellion and butchery. I shan't be such an ass as to mention your name. But I'll see that

MacQueen understands that he has the choice between leaving here an officer that I trust or going smash."

"It's not only *decent*," said Lyon, "it's better business in the long run, to do things fairly."

"Don't I know it? I didn't do close on a dozen years in settlement work for nothing—and in the Santal Parganas, too. If you play the armed highwayman with these folk, you'll ensure your own murder—unless they ~~fun~~ extreme measures, and merely burn your crops and buildings before disappearing into the jungles. In either case, your returns are finished."

5

Late at night, they saw lanterns, and heard the confusion of men approaching the house. Lyon and Felvus "stood to"—they had loaded rifles within reach.

Hari Singh's voice hailed them before they could see him. "Saheb!"

He and others brought a Santal prisoner, bound with withes. Hari Singh handed Lyon a sal-twig, on which were two leaves remaining.

Lyon looked at it curiously. "I wonder what the devil this means?"

He handed it to Felvus, who turned it round. They both looked questioningly at Hari Singh.

Hari Singh, holding up two fingers, expounded his text eagerly. "It means, saheb, that in two days they are to meet where they hold their *parab*."

Lyon gave orders to keep their captive till morning, when they could decide what to do.

Felvus agreed. "I'm sure it will be a good thing to nobble him till the gathering is over. If this lad, who's acting as convener, puts in an alibi as our guest"—he paused, to let his words sink in—"some of the boys may never get to hear of the revels and so won't put in an appearance at all."

"But what's caused all this bother?" he asked, when they were alone. "I know the

Santal; he's not a chap to give trouble normally. Someone has been *teasing* Mr. Jungly Wallah; and as Commissioner I demand to know his name."

"You're right," said Lyon. "It's the usual trouble—whenever there *is* trouble. But it's blown up more suddenly than usual. We had a baddish Rains—intermittent, and ending too soon. So crops were poor, which has hit us all round. I haven't screwed out the last pice from my tenants—how could I?"

"Of course you couldn't."

"So MacQueen proposes to deport me. But never mind that. Rice is dear, so you can guess the sort of thing that's been happening."

Felvus nodded. "Wholesale indebtedness to moneylenders who've come crowding in like vultures. Agreements made that these poor fools don't begin to understand. Then some bright particular ass of a Shylock anticipates things by claiming the right to turn Mr. Jungly Wallah out of a few *bighas* where he's been growing brinjals. Is challenged; and produces a document to which

Mr. Jungly Wallah, in return for a square meal and several square drinks, had recently affixed his thumb-mark in presence of duly accredited witnesses. Mr. J. W. is informed that he has sold his birthright; the Police, being called in, affirm that this is all so. He lurks in the neighbouring woods with a hatchet; he meets other Jungly Wallahs, and the whole of junglywallahdom puts its thick woolly heads together, they all vaguely remember thumb-marking similar documents and decide that the best way of averting the day of eviction is by massacring Shylock. So they beat their drums—listen!”

“I *hate* that drumming,” said Nicky. She shuddered, peering with frightened eyes into the unfriendly wilderness.

“You’ve got to leave it to us, my dear,” said Felvus. “I don’t believe things are so bad. Thank God we haven’t got a young and zealous officer as Mr. J. W.’s nearest neighbour! When you have, said young and zealous officer walks up to massed and drumming junglywallahdom and announces that he has arrested the whole of it and pro-

poses to lead it to gaol forthwith. And jungly-wallahdom sees him lying dead before it realises what has happened. Then in a frenzy of funk and victory it charges on, mopping up a few more young and zealous officers. Until it meets a detachment of police with nice modern guns. Then all ends happily. We shoot down a few thousands of Mr. Jungly Wallah, we hang a dozen or so for alleged leading of this dangerous revolt, we make awards to police and civil officers whose promptitude and courage have suppressed the said dangerous revolt, and we confirm Shylock in possession of property he so generously bought at about a halfpenny an acre."

"You have it," said Lyon. "But the Santals haven't butchered anyone yet, so the game is in its beginnings."

"There's no reason why it should get beyond beginnings. But this tired girl has got to turn in. And to cease worrying. One thing more, while she's here as a witness. Whatever happens, or whatever is done, the sole responsibility is mine. You're not going to

be dragged into this, John. Suppose—I say, let us suppose, for the sake of supposing——”

“That’s clear enough,” said Nicky.

“I won’t be laughed at, young lady. Least of all by you, who may as well consider yourself under arrest for various misdemeanours, the last committed against the very person of the Government, insulted at your threshold. But let us suppose that the necessities of the case involved destruction of zemindari property. Then you must remember that all this happened under the direct and explicit instructions of the only official present.”

“We’ll see,” said Lyon. “If you’re going to swank so about your civilian authority, I’m going to represent the military power. I’ve a great mind to proclaim martial law and to supersede you. You civilians never *are* any good, anyway, when things get really bad. However—carry on until they do.”

The two powers, civil and military, now ordered Nicky off to bed. “It’s a bit hard on me,” she complained, “being the sole tiny nut beneath two such mighty crackers. Since I’m your only subject, and you both concur,

O most august Civil *and* Military Powers"—she curtsied to each in turn, and kissed her father—"I suppose I must obey."

"Of course," said Felvus.

But she was still haunting the veranda five minutes later, when he came out of his room, into which he had gone. "It's all rot, you know, Lyon," he told his friend, "your thinking you can station lathials at that place to stop folk coming in. There'll be the devil to pay if the zemindari ever hear that you've refused to admit their officer."

"He's not coming in, all the same."

"I anticipated that you would take that line. So—since you're bent on making reconciliation impossible, and I'm equally bent on keeping a loophole for it—we'll have to make your illegal action legal. I've written a chit for the saheb whom your moss-troopers are going to hold up, explaining that the countr's roused—it's a lie, as we all know; I only said it to see how pretty Miss Nicky looks when she blanches——"

"I did not blanch," said Nicky indignantly.

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"I have told him this whopper, writing *in propria persona* as the Commissioner, summoned at a time of unusual stress to take charge."

"Which reminds me," said Nicky, under her breath. "Why *did* you turn up at this juncture, Phelbus Saheb—when you had told me that you were booked up with jobs till long after Christmas, all of them too important to be left?"

Felvus had gone on speaking. "I have told him that he's held up at my orders and for the sake of his own safety. Nicky—since you've disobeyed us both, you may as well do penance by being useful! If I hand you this chit, can you see that it goes by someone trusty next morning early? It's got to get through before the fellow arrives; and it's *most* important that it doesn't fall into wrong hands."

"Why, certainly, Mr. Felvus."

She took the note. She was in her room and had set it in a conspicuous place, where she would see it early. She was already undressed when her glance fell on it again, and she saw

that it was inscribed to "Norman Spencer-Rivers, Esq."

"So *that's* why you came now, Phelbus Saheb! You're a dear, if there ever was one! I had no idea that an old man could turn into such a darling!"—which was hard on Felvus, who was not yet fifty. "Why didn't some woman have the sense to find this out ages ago and make you marry her? I shall never think well of my sex's brains again—Phelbus, you *dear!*"

She was excited, and not with fear, with this ally at her side. He had said that her promise to her father must be recovered and by Norman; and he had come to stand by the boy when he confronted the anger wakened after a quarter of a century. Surely they would conquer, the three of them together! She resolved, eagerly and fiercely, that she would not let Felvus down. He had made this cause his own—as he was always making others' causes his own—and she and Norman would make her Dad see reason. She would save her father, too. They two, she and Norman, would see to it that the

long night of wretchedness should finish for him.

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She did not know till afterwards that neither her father nor Felvus had gone to bed. They watched the two sides of the house; and in the stables the horses stood saddled. Servants were on guard also; but Lyon and Felvus had more experience than to expect them to keep awake.

It was a little after three when Felvus on his veranda thought he heard a twig crack. A minute later, there was no question that several cracked. He checked his first impulse to call out, "*Quy hai?*" Instead, he went down the steps and looked round. It had been brilliant moon before, but now a western spur of Trisul hid it and everything lay in shadow. Nevertheless, he could see a dark mass lying in the pathway. Going up, he found to his amazement that a vast heap of dry wood was piled against the house. Men

must have been coming and going with it for some time before he caught the snapping of twigs as the branches were deposited on the ground. It said much for the skill and silence of these unseen enemies, he reflected, and realised that while it was important to act swiftly it was more important to act wisely. As a matter of fact, he had been dozing, and had just awakened when he heard the sounds that had brought him out to investigate.

He told Lyon what he had discovered. "What about the two days' grace you were to have? Do you think you can trust those fellows of yours who caught the messenger? What about it all being a put-up thing?"

Lyon considered. "No," he said at last. "I can trust Hari Singh absolutely. I don't believe this *is* a Santal affair. They don't do this kind of careful deliberate murder—not of sahebs, I mean."

"No," said Felvus sardonically. "I accept your addition. They leave the saheb alone, as a creature horned and taloned, unknown but very dangerous. Their own feuds they settle

at the time of their big annual shoot, and no questions asked."

"That's right. Every year we hear that half a dozen chaps have been unlucky enough to be clawed up by leopards or bears, during their big shikar. I tell them such mortality argues a shocking lack of skill. But they only grin. They know that I know."

"Then," said Felvus, "there must be some private enemies of yours at work."

"That will be Khalasi or, more likely, Kestanadi. I've been crazed with lawsuits he's been financing."

"You can bet your life, too, he's got at MacQueen in some way. That's the *fons et origo* of the accusation that you've been running this job badly."

"I'll do my damndest to light on his trail now!"

"So," said Felvus musingly, "this fellow with a grudge against you is using this row that the Santals are getting up, to get even. It's a clever dodge; and usual. After a Santal dust-up, some of the heaviest items in the bill of damages presented to Mr. Jungly

Wallah are generally for things he never ordered. However, these enquiries, deeply interesting though they are, had better be postponed."

"I'd give a lot," Lyon brooded, "to catch the beggars red-handed. I wonder if I couldn't do it?"

"What! You're going to be roasted out of existence before the night ends, and all you're able to think of is a fascinating but—after all, after *all*, John; pull yourself together—hardly relevant line of abstract speculation! Do we—or do we not—propose to sit here quietly while these chaps burn our cover?"

"No, in thunder," said Lyon, roused. "I'll dish them with their own spoon. They're going to fire the jungle all round us, are they? I'll fire it first. They're all in there somewhere."

Excitement took hold, and boyish gleefulness in presence of danger, action, and a match of wits. "We'll set them a racing match," cried Felvus, "to see whether Brother Fire or they have the longer legs."

"I'm only sorry," said Lyon, recurring to his first train of thought, "that I shan't be in a position to see how the race goes. I might have liked to award a few prizes."

He roused the servants, and the dry brushwood piled against the house was flung back on the jungle. That they had guessed rightly what their enemies proposed was quickly seen. Fires began to twinkle in the blackness of the surrounding woods. The besieged lit the forest edges as quickly as possible. The ground was strewn with leaves sun-dried even before they had fallen; but they were moist with dew, and there was not a breath of wind, consequently the fires moved slowly. But there was soon a sufficient roar encircling the house, and tides of warm air moving inward upon it. Nicky was waked by the tumult, and came out in her dressing-gown—dumbfounded to see the excited servants and the wilderness stabbed with tongues of flame.

As it grew towards morning a wind blew up, and the fire gathered force. It blew strongly, away from the Sacred Mountain;

and the flames, from being a red sea lapping round the roots of the trees, became a mightier sea lashed into torment of angry waves. It took hold of the trees themselves, and you could see it racing outward and hear the crash of falling timber. Nicky was watching, fascinated and miserable. Felvus in a flash of knowledge guessed her thought before she knew it herself, and interpreted it.

"Don't worry, my dear," he said. "It'll look bad when it's over, but all this stuff will grow again, and all the better for its burning, if you only give it time."

But how much time? You do not burn out fine sals and teaks, and recover their like in a year or in several years. It was her home—the home that had become a place where she was lost and desolate, but to dream and memory still her home, still recoverable—that was being burned away. A great tract had already been cleared, and was nothing but charred stumps on a carpet of smoking ashes. She could see the heat rising in vast spirals, even in that dim light. It was like the vision of a host of spirits departing from the

ruin of the loveliness where they had lived. The Dryads were going, from the ridges of Trisul the Oreads were gazing in pity and terror. The bungalow itself might as well have been dismantled. Pan was dead.

For the present, however, the bungalow was saved, and the lives of its inmates. While it was yet dark Nicky heard the clatter of hoofs; it was her father, in high spirits, riding to find out more. "Hullo, Nicky!" he called. "Better have had your sleep out. It's nothing, my dear; nothing at all. Felvy'll explain what happened. I'm going to see if I can surprise and spot any of the kind friends who arranged this little bonfire for us on a cold night." He waved to her affectionately, and she saw Fanny wincing away from this or that brittle twig or patch of hot cinders.

The sound of his going brought out Felvus, who had gone into his room. "Well, of all the crazy tricks!" he said. "Nicky, my dear, if it weren't for my high regard for you I'd call your father an ass. Is he fey, or what, that he goes racing off looking for danger! Why can't he wait for a bit of light?"

As a matter of fact, John Lyon had done exactly what his daughter might have done—or Felvus himself would have done for two pins. Sheer animal glee at the discomfiture of enemies and the recklessness born of being awake at the turn of night to day had taken possession of him. He had gone to the stables to make sure that all was well there; he had seen Fanny, restless with the clamour and lurid flashes in the black world about, and he had persuaded himself that it would be a dashing act of soldiership to ride out now, before night's curtain lifted, and to surprise whoever was watching on the other side of this nearly burnt out patch. Two miles away the jungle was still burning; but in the distance between there must be either corpses, if his foes had been caught—which was unlikely, from the slow fashion in which the fire had taken hold at first—or men waiting, chagrined and defeated. He would—by a swift stroke of generalship, more than mere soldiership—find out at once who it was that had aimed at their lives when they slept. If he hesitated till the full

day glared down, he would never know this, and they would be exposed to a second attempt.

Nicky went in to dress. She had just finished when she heard the sound of galloping hooves. She looked out and saw Fanny, riderless, as on the morning when Lyon had been flung down in the storm. The terrors of that time returned, with a deeper pang of certainty and despair. She saw the alarm in Felvus' face. Fanny swerved at the house and swung round to the stables. Felvus followed, and caught her standing by her stall. He mounted her, and rode up to the bungalow, to say to Nicky, "Nicky, *please!* If you love me, if you think I love you, promise me not to stir from here till I come back! Whatever's happened can't have happened very far away. Nicky! I beg of you, dear, promise you'll be patient and trust me!"

He was back within twenty minutes, and had given Fanny's bridle to a servant. "My *dear!*" he said; and could say no more.

Knowing that she knew, he found speech. "Fanny must have plunged on some bit of

blazing charcoal; and we know that *he* wasn't himself, after all his illness. He can't have suffered a moment's pain. You can see where Fanny reared and shot him out of the saddle. It's a mass of smouldering ashes. There are great pockets of the stuff about. I fancy he saw something, and drove straight ahead at it. Her knees are all singed and she has bad burns."

They walked out together to the spot. When they reached her father's body, she threw herself down and kissed the dead man as if she could never let him go. Nothing had happened but what was bound to happen. Now, or a year hence, Lyon was sure to toss his life away. Yet Felvus, aware of this, had never seen anything that so hurt him as the sight of this girl crying so quietly and terribly.

She rose at last. "Mr. Felvus," she said, very steadily and calmly, "I've got to get away from that place." She pointed to the house.

For a moment she seemed about to break down again. "Oh, take me away from it!

Take me anywhere, Mr. Felvus. It's all *ruined!*" But she recovered herself, to say "But I meant, I must get away now. Don't worry about me, Mr. Felvus. I shall come back. Only I must—I *must*—be by myself."

She turned, and her face was set towards Trisul's crest and the still unravaged line of green that led to it. Felvus knew there was nothing to fear, except the suppression of the misery in her soul. She was crying as she ran—ran as if in haste to get away from this charred desert where her father lay dead. But he checked himself from the impulse to follow.

7

Nicky found she could not continue as she had begun; the mountain grew too steep. She had paused for breath when her name was called. "Nicky! Nicky!" She looked round, and saw that Norman was running up to her.

"You're too late, Norman," she said.

Her eyes seemed to hold no place for him

or his memory. They looked searchingly at him, then past him. "You came too late. You had to get back my promise from him, you know. And now you never can."

"I came as soon as ever I heard from Felvus," he said. "I should have been here last night, but your people stopped me. I had to give them the slip in the darkness; and I've walked every inch of the way, so as not to be caught when I started."

He saw awareness of him dawning. But the glimmer died. "Go back, Norman. My dear, you must go back. Leave me alone. I shall be all right."

As he hesitated, she repeated her wish. "Norman! I'm going to be alone. Go back."

He stayed gazing after her but she did not turn. She was out of hearing of any word that he could send, wandering by a haunted path where every leaf was crying out to her the words that she had said to him. "Go back, Nicolette! You must leave us." She had thought that her place was here, and would be here always. But the forest had turned unfriendly, her father's love and hers had

been poisoned, there had come a human grief in woods and hills; and now their beauty was ashes, their shelter was finished. She was utterly desolate as she knew that all was over. She was thinking of all the days and ways she had gone with the dead man whom she had loved and understood and protected. She had saved him—she knew now—from his own memories and moods, a thousand times she had saved him. She recalled how intimate had been their journeys through the springtide glory of blossomed palas and under scarlet simul red-handed thrust far into heaven; a million, million tiny sights of beauty and moments of laughter crowded back upon her. Had she ever forgotten anything of her life in this enchanted wilderness? She remembered the infinite cosiness of their existence in that skin-strewn, rifle-decorated bungalow, her father cheerful and happy and even Kitty restful—the rain pouring down hour after hour, the moths and birds flickering in or dashing down exhausted in corners of the verandas—Christmas, with its bright lights

in the sky and air, and crisp, intoxicating winds—summer, when they had flagged weary almost to death. The rare periods when they had been host and hostess, when she had been aware of kindness and admiration, all through those years when it had never begun to occur to her that men were anything but friends of her father and herself. Their interests and anxieties—her winter garden in which her father took such a pride—the horses that they bought and sold and kept for men gone on furlough—the rumour of leopards haunting Trisul, of bears back in its caves, the *pugs* found near stables and verandas, telling of what dangerous neighbours had been theirs in the night—the jungle with its legends and memories, a garrulous mother of tales, a nurse of infinite understanding and soothing quietness. Most of all, she saw now what a silence had been round her father and herself, a roof beneath which they had lived in trustfulness and affection. “But you must go, Nicolettel! It is all finished.” Yes, she must go. And she wanted to go, though she felt that her heart

could never break again, as it had broken now.

From the bungalow Norman and Felvus saw her figure emerge and clamber on to Trisul, looking abroad over the plain. The boy's impatience and misery became intolerable to him. "I can't leave her alone like that," he said. "I must go and look after her. She said I was too late," he added.

Felvus was moved by the wretchedness in his face. "You were only a few hours too late," he said. "How would it have been if you had been a good quarter of a century too late? Don't worry, Rivers."

"You say, Don't worry. But how can I help worrying when I see her wandering alone where anything might happen to her—absolutely *anything*, Mr. Felvus?"

Felvus caught his arm and held him back. "Listen. You've *got* to let her get away—from *that*." He pointed to the desolation. "Don't get yourself mixed up with what has happened, for it has just been all misery. Nicky's all right. I *know*—and I'll swear it by all that I consider holy—by Nicky herself, if

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you don't want me to use words that men use lightly, meaning nothing but emphasis by them! She'll come back to you, if you'll only wait."

"If I'll only *wait!*" the boy repeated.

THE END